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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

PROGRAMME - January

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 9-i-2005: Manjira Barrage, Rangareddy District: Route Punjagutta – Ameerpet – Sanathnagar – Kukatpally – Patancheru – Sangareddy. From Sangareddy Mandal Office, turn left and go in for 3 km to the EEC centre. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 am and assemble at the EEC Centre. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Openbilled and Painted Storks that nest on islands in the reservoir. There are sure to be lots of ducks, especially Pintails, Pochards, Shovellers, Teal and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. Ospreys are often seen, as also Demoiselle Cranes. Look out also for Mugger Crocodiles in the lake. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 17-i-2005, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the Press.

NOTES & NEWS

AN IMPROMPTU VISIT TO HIMAYAT SAGAR

TANK

By

Shafaat Ulla

It all started with Deccan Chronicle publishing a photograph of Flamingos wading in Himayat Sagar lake, about twenty kilometers south-east of Hyderabad city. Flamingos in Hyderabad? Impossible! The first to rush and satisfy their curiosity were Raajeev and Azam, our fellow members from BSAP, who promptly reported to us the wonderful sighting.

Next day, Wednesday 1st December, Aasheesh couldn't contain himself and I joined him early in the morning and we headed towards the lake, armed with binoculars and spotting scope and a variety of field guide books.

It was a sad sight that greeted us as far as the water is concerned, since the entire lake was dried up except for a small shallow patch of muddy water in the centre. This however, proved to be a boon for the birds as thousands of them, consisting of about thirty varieties, converged on the water body for an extended feast.

We could count about fifty Greater Flamingos foraging near the water's edge with their very special inverted beaks. So many flamingos with their beautiful pink feathers is indeed a very rare

sight in our area. The other surprise that awaited us was the presence of about 400 to 500 Open-billed Storks, whose main diet are snails, which obviously were plentiful. The other rarely seen birds were a couple of Avocets with their upturned slender bills and pure white plumage as if they had used Surf XL! Then there was a pair of equally rare Curlews, with their long and thin down-curved beaks, probing deep into the soft mud.

For bird lovers, it was a feast for the eyes, as we could see hundreds of ducks, consisting of Spotbills, Red-crested Pochards and Brahminy Ducks. As we were busy identifying the ducks, in flies four pairs of Barheaded Geese, who circled for a while before settling down. As if this was not enough, about twenty Spoonbills took off from the far end and flew overhead in a neat and unhurried formation with their odd spoon-shaped bills sticking out in front.

There were a variety of other waders and we were going crazy identifying them, mainly because of the distance. Apart from the Blackwinged Stilts which were in excess of easily one hundred, there were Blacktailed Godwits, Ruffs, Redshanks and Sandpipers; as also Grey Herons, Painted Storks, Little and Median Egrets, et. al.

An exciting addition to our sighting was the *tamasha* that was being performed by the streamlined River Terns, doing beautiful aerobatics along with Black and Brownheaded Gulls, hovering over the nets of two fishermen who happened to be preparing for

their dinner. Also in the fray was a graceful Brahminy Kite gliding effortlessly over the water looking to steal a tasty morsel.

Although we could have stayed the whole day, we had to rush back reluctantly, as it was a working day; but not before promising ourselves to come back soon with other birdwatchers, before the lake dries up completely and the birds bid us adieu to seek greener pastures elsewhere.

URBAN BIRDING

by

"The City Bird-Brain"

This column has had a two-fold advantage. Firstly, so I have been informed, it is making other members more aware of the birds surrounding them. Secondly, it is making me more aware of the birds around me – to take the first example that comes to hand: I have added a most unusual species to my list of urban birds. A Common Sandpiper was spotted in the bed of the rather dirty stream that runs behind the house. Now, this stream seems to be composed almost entirely of soapsuds and other rather gruesome looking objects (a dead rat, amongst other things...!), yet the Sandpiper was there, and piping away quite happily, it appeared. However, my object this week is not the Common Sandpiper; I want to focus this week's column on that most ubiquitous bird, the common House Crow.

Who does not know this bird – and yet I venture to assert that, with all the work done on this species, there will always be something new to observe if one only sets about observations over a long and sustained period. Their penchant for robbery and piracy is, of course, well known. When I was in the Crocodile Bank near Chennai, these birds were amongst the most unwelcome pests we have ever had. Not only were they partial to young crocs and other baby reptiles like tortoises and turtles, they also had developed a great taste for the crocodile food (fish and beef offal and bone). One could always tell the feeding day from other days from the huge number of crows that suddenly congregated from all over the district on the Croc Bank on feeding days. And in spite of all the hectic activity in the Croc enclosures to get at the food, I have never seen a crow wind up in a crocodile's mouth. Obviously their instinct for self-preservation is quite strong.

Talking of self-preservation, in the old days when we young lads were more adept in the use of the air rifle than the binoculars, I have put in many assiduous hours in the pursuit of House Crows. To no avail – the clever creatures were well aware of the difference between a rifle and a stick. Point a stick at them and they would cock an eye at you and caw in amusement. Appear on the scene carrying a rifle, or even a catapult, and the blackguards would be in flight long before you got within decent range.

I reckon there is only one other bird that can get the better of the House Crow in combat, and that is the Black Drongo. On the other hand, I have seen even the Small Blue Kingfisher delivering some hefty whacks with its bill on the back of a House Crow that appeared to have designs on the nest of the Kingfisher. The Drongo, on the other hand, knows what to do when a Crow appears and, what is more, the Crow knows this as well.

Consequently, they keep well away from the Drongos – why court unnecessary trouble, seems to be their motto. Quite intelligent too. But this very intelligence is used by the Koel in its habit of foisting its eggs onto the crows. Observe the male Koel appear near the nest of the crow while the female Koel slips up noiselessly from behind. Then, while the crows are in hot pursuit of her spouse, she flies into the unguarded nest, lays her eggs and slips out again with the crows none the wiser. Crows can count up to two and if, on their return to the nest, they can see more than two eggs, then they are quite happy and satisfied that the nest has not been tampered with. So the crows carry on with the domestic chores and, when the speckled Koel chicks hatch, they are quite proud of them. Not quite as intelligent as they are made out to be, apparently!

The House Crow has completely adapted itself to life in the city. So much so that, where there is no human activity, there will be found no crows. Don't take my word for it – go out to the jungles and do a count of how many crows you see. I guarantee that you will not have many, if at all. On the other hand, even without any attempt at counting, it is impossible to spend a day in any city without a sighting of at least a dozen odd crows here and there. And if you happen to live in an area where these chaps roost, then you will know all about it. They ensure that... through their noisy cawing and loud bedtime conversations before they finally drop off to sleep. And at times like this, they are likely to fall prey to the Great Horned Owl. The Owl knows the value of secrecy and silence in its pursuit of crows. If he gives himself away, there is no way he can make a kill on that particular night as all the crows in the roost will descend on him en-masse and hound him out of a year's growth! The wise owl ensures that the kill is made with all possible speed and with the minimum of noise and fuss.

With all its bad habits (breakfasting on a dead rat in the middle of the road, stealing whatever it can lay its beak on, etc. etc.) I have a soft spot for this creature. He is so universally NOT LIKED that one cannot help feeling admiration that he survives, indeed thrives, in the midst of all this anti-crow movement. But at the same time be it mentioned that, if you have a liking for little birds nesting in your garden, then the crow is the last visitor you want. Great robbers of nests, these birds think nothing of taking eggs, young birds and even adult birds if they can catch them. That sickle bill is a most effective hunting weapon. I have seen a house crow making a meal off a warbler. Whether he had caught it himself or found it dead, I do not know; but I incline to the former. They are good hunters when they have to be.

Hunted too, are these birds. The cages in the Chowk bird market will always have a few rather sorry-looking crows peering hopefully out of the bars. Who would be wanting to buy them, I cannot say – but there must be a market, or the canny bird-dealer wouldn't be stocking the species. Maybe the practitioners of the black arts, the tantrics, use them for Black Magic. Or maybe they have other uses of a culinary nature...! Whatever the reason, they are there – I have seen more than 20 stuffed in a single cage, which couldn't hold more than 10 at the most.

They have their enemies in the wild as well – the Luggar Falcon is partial to them as part of its diet. The odd crow will also find

its way into the belly of the Peregrine Falcon. But apart from the falcon tribe, the birds have few enemies to reckon with. And even the falcons are not always successful in having crows for lunch. That self-preservation instinct comes out even more strongly when the crows are pursued by a raptor. I have only a few times seen one caught – and that was mostly a solitary specimen, and not a member of a flock.

Talking of flocks, it is learnt that a flock of crows is collectively called a “murder”, than which there could be no more appropriate name. Put a “murder” of crows on the air and the music they manage to generate is sheer murder. I remember seeing a large rookery in Khammam once – about half a mile before you got to the place, you could hear it.

But enough of this subject or the goodwill I have managed to generate through this column will rapidly disappear if I go on about such creatures as the House Crows. I will merely reiterate that, no matter how much you think you know these birds, they will always produce something new that you had never noticed before. So put on those observation caps and spare some time to observe the House Crow. Until next time – Happy Birding!

Post-script: Apropos of seeing interesting birds in the city, here's a list of my latest sightings (on 12th December) in the backyard around the aforementioned dirty stream: Great Tit, Common White-Eye, Grey Wagtail, Whitebreasted Waterhen and Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher; to name just a few. Also a Spotted Owlet was heard just last night (13th December). For the interested; be it mentioned that I have around 15 km. of built-up area around my humble residence! All of which brings us back to the observation I made in the first of these memoirs that, whether we want them or not, the birds are there: And they can be seen also from time to time. Keep those eyes peeled...!

NIZAMABAD: AT LAST!

by
Arjun

September 10th - The trip to Nizamabad (after many postponements) was finally underway. The day dawned bright and clear as five of us (Mr Shafaat Ulla, Mr Bhaskar Rao, Ms Shweta Vyas, Ms Sheetal Vyas and yours truly) met at the Jubilee bus stand. It was not going to remain bright and clear though. We boarded the bus, bought our tickets, and finally, we were off. No sooner had we left the city limits, than it started raining. And rain it did, all the way to Nizamabad. Our host, Mr Ashok Kumar, received us at the bus stand. He had made arrangements for our stay, on the top floor of a school run by him.

We freshened up and went out for lunch. It was still raining. It rained all afternoon, washing out all chances of birding. Since no birding was possible, some of us did a bit of local sightseeing in the evening, which was very interesting. We visited the old fort, now divided into a prison and a temple. We climbed to the very top of the fort and from the window there we were able to catch a close view of a few Pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) and House Swifts (*Apus affinis*) on the wing. This was followed up by a visit

to another temple and a church, which yielded us a fleeting glimpse of a large owl (at the temple), and two smaller ones at the church. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the owls remain unidentified. We then walked back, snacking on mirchi bhajjis on the way. We were joined later that night by another member, Priyank (who brought along with him, a GPS instrument). After enjoying dinner (which was a trifle delayed), we retired for the day.

September 11th - We got off to an early start, with everyone waking up at 5 AM. Thankfully it was not raining. We celebrated the fact with a round of tea, and set off in a jeep that was hired for us by our host. Our first stop was a lake called Ashoksagar (18°42.411'N 78°02.190'E. Alt: 384m). The sight that greeted us was that of a crab, pincers raised, not unlike a sheriff in a cowboy film, trying to keep outlaws out of his town. We saw a tree that was host to more than ten Baya weaver bird's nests. Some other notable sightings included, a Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus*), a Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), hovering over the water, and an unidentified Eagle.

We moved along from there to another lake Alisagar (18°40.822'N 78°00.628'E. Alt: 387m). We were greeted (almost at the gate), by a Goldfronted Chloropsis (*Chloropsis aurifrons*). It gave us a pretty good look at it, almost as if it were a model at the India Fashion week. There were many Rose ringed Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) there but not much else.

From there we moved on to yet another water body called Tanakala lake (18°40.132'N 78°00.176'E Alt: 387m). This yielded quite a few interesting sightings, apart from the more commonly seen birds. We did see a few Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), a Blackbellied Finch-Lark (*Eremopterix grisea*), a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), a Spotted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) and a few Small Blue Kingfishers, but what really took the cake was the sighting of a group of twelve Black Headed Munias (*Lonchura malacca*). These munias put on quite a wonderful show for us, a song and dance show. Twelve of them sitting on a single branch flitting here and there, jumping short distances, only to return, giving us a great view from almost every angle imaginable. It was very well choreographed indeed.

On the road from Tanakala, (position: 18°37.984'N 77°59.539'E Alt 381m) we came across a tree with many egrets congregated there. When we got down to get a closer look, we saw nearby a bush with more than twenty House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). On the other side of the road we saw a few Baya's nests. Now what was surprising was the fact that there was a White throated Munia (*Lonchura malabarica*) that was trying repeatedly to enter the Baya's nests, but the Bayas every time chased it away. What was the motive behind this? Was the munia looking for a quick snack? Was it trying to hijack the nest? Or was it just a nest-to-nest sales bird trying to earn an honest living?

We moved on to the lake behind the Somalingeshwar temple (18°24.752'N 77°52.156'E Alt 372), where we saw some water birds like the Indian Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Pheasant tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) and Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*). The sighting that stood out here was

that of a Blackwinged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) hovering in the air for more than one and a half minutes. Apparently its prey got away that time because the hovering was not followed by a dive.

Moving on to yet another water body, Borlam lake (18°22.801'N 77°54.307'E. Alt: 406) we saw two Lesser Whistling Teals (*Dendrocygna javanica*), a Pied Kingfisher hunting successfully, a Large Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*), a Baybacked Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*), a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) and a female Bush Chat. Moving on from this location we saw a eucalyptus tree with thirty five bats roosting on it.

After this we stopped for lunch at Banswada. Fortified, we then travelled towards Nizamsagar. We took a road that was right along a canal, leading to Nizamsagar. Some of the sightings were, a Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), a Small Blue Kingfisher was also seen, holding a fish in its beak, without swallowing. House Swifts were nesting under a bridge. Another great sight was that of a Red Munia (*Estrilda amandava*), a funny sight was that of a Large Pied Wagtail chasing away a House Swift when it tried to land on the ground near it. We also saw Redwattled Lapwing nesting on the canal bed (which was mostly dry except for a few puddles here and there). We then turned on to a proper tarmac road, going towards Nizamsagar. On the way a spectacular sight met our eyes-- a pair of Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*), sitting on the top of a bald tree; this sight especially in the evening light was an amazing one. We went on to the Nizamsagar bus stop, where we stopped for refreshments, but the real refreshing sight was that of a few Common Grey Hornbills (*Tockus birostris*) that flew across, as we were sitting down to drink tea. We then went to this village Voddepalli. On the way there, we saw some Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The village had this massive tamarind tree on which there were hundreds and hundreds of Cormorants and Egrets roosting, more and more coming in as we watched. It was getting dark by this time so we decided to cut our trip short and head back home. On the way back, during a stop, we were treated to

an amazing sight. The rains had washed the sky clean and we could now see stars all around. It was like being in the planetarium, only no seats, but then again, there was no charge either. We headed home and after dinner turned in.

September 12th - Another early start. This time we travelled to Mallaram forest (18°37.090'N 78°02.827'E Alt: 412m), not very far from Nizamabad. On the road we saw a couple of Common Quails (*Coturnix coturnix*).

In the forest we saw two Spotbilled Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) and a few Lesser Whistling Teals flying overhead. A Common Green Pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*) was spotted almost hidden away in the foliage. A Pigmy Woodpecker (*Picoides nanus*) was also spotted. We had our breakfast in the jungle, next to a stream. It was delicious. Post breakfast we went deeper into the jungle, amongst the sightings there was, a pair of Small Minivets (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*), Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*), White browed fantail Flycatcher (*Rhipidura aureola*). Other than the birds, the forest had some amazing rock formation, One rock was shaped like a mushroom, another looked like a Big Mac burger (maybe that was because all that birding had made us hungry). We headed out of the jungle and near the jeep we saw a couple of munias building a nest. From there we moved to a couple more spots, but these did not yield too many more interesting birds. We went to our host's house for lunch, and what a fabulous lunch it was. After lunch we went to the school where we packed our bags and then went on to the bus stop, where we said our goodbyes, and boarded the bus back to Hyderabad. We are thankful to Mr Ashok Kumar and his family, who put us up and took very good care of us.

The trip was a memorable one, and in spite of the small size of the group we had a great time.

Notice - Annual General Meeting of the Society

The Annual General Meeting of the Society, which was to be held in October 2004, had to be postponed twice owing to unavoidable circumstances. **The Annual General Meeting is now scheduled to be held on Monday, 21st February 2005 at 6.00 p.m., at Vidyaranya School, Saifabad.** All members are requested to make a note of the date and time and to be present for the same. The Agenda for the meeting is given below:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 6) Any other Business

FIELD CRAFT - Siraj A Taher and Sachin Jaltare

DRONGOS: These are black birds with long forked tails. They inhabit both forest and open country where they perch on exposed points looking for insect prey. Drongos are rather noisy and often solitary.

BLACK DRONGO

(*Dicrurus naenocercus*)

L=31 cms. Bulbul +

Sexes alike

Black

Black

Dark Glossy
Ashy-grey

Overall
Glossy
Black

ASHY DRONGO

(*Dicrurus leucophaea*)

L=30 cms

Bulbul +

Sexes alike

Deep
Forked
Tail

Deep Forked
Tail

Black

Gray

Glossy
Indigo

White Belly
& Vent

WHITE-BELLIED DRONGO

(*Dicrurus caerulescens*)

L=24 cms, Bulbul +

Sexes alike

Forked
Tail

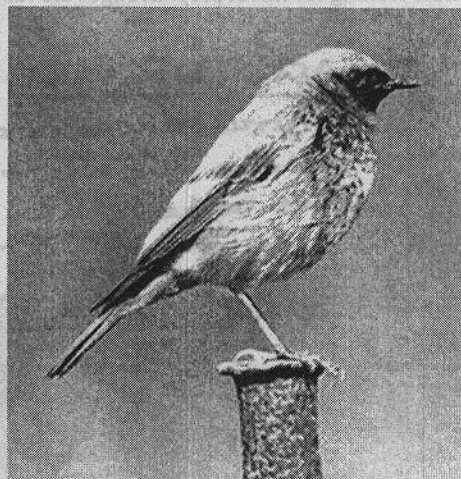
BIRD OF THE MONTH - THE BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

The Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the Thrush family (*Turdidae*), but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher (*Muscicapidae*).

It is a widespread breeder in south and central Europe, but very localised in Great Britain. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, but northern birds winter in southern Europe or North Africa. It nests in crevices or holes in buildings.

It is more common in Britain as a bird of passage and winter visitor. On passage it is fairly common on the east and south coasts.

Reports of early Common Redstarts (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) may sometimes refer to this species. The "fire" of the tail labels the bird as a Redstart, but it may be distinguished from the Common Redstart, which is the same size at 14 cm length, by its sootier appearance, even when the distinctive white wing patch is not apparent, as in immature males.



The male has no chestnut on the flanks nor white on the forehead. The female is greyer than the Common Redstart, and at any age the grey axillaries and under wing-coverts are distinctive. In the Common Redstart these are buff or chestnut.

The Black Redstart in most parts of India, is the harbinger of the winter migration. Late in October, the birds begin to appear - and that generally means that the monsoon is now officially over and winter has started to take over. As a herald, it may not be as accurate as the Pied Crested Cuckoo is for the monsoons, but it is still an unfailing sign to all concerned that it is time to take those sweaters and jackets out of the cupboard and air them in readiness for the coming cold season.

Seeing that the Redstarts are in, and they being the forerunner of the winter inward migration, it is somehow appropriate that we begin our series on the Bird of the Month, with this species, the Black Redstart.

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PROGRAMME - February

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 27-ii-2005: ICRISAT Campus, Patancheru: Medak District: Route Panjagutta - Ameerpet - Kukatpally - BHEL Ramchandrapuram. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.00 - 7.15 am and assemble near the gate. There should be some migrants around at this time of the year. Added attractions here are the sightings made by BSAP members, of Flamingoes and there are sure to be lots of ducks on all the lakes, especially Pintails, Pochards, Shovellers, Teal, Brahminy Duck and Widgeons around, maybe even the odd few Barheaded Geese. Spoonbills may well be an added attraction on the big lake. Amongst this bonanza of waterfowl, don't forget the grassland and field birds - Ground owls are known to be around, also Lesser Florican. And the Pied Harriers also could be sailing around. Plenty of larks and pipits also plus the attraction of nesting Grey Herons, Ibis and a Tawny Eagle or two. Keep the eyes peeled for the Steppe Eagle also which often appears. This will be a longish half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608).

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 21-ii-2005, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Annual General Meeting of the Society. Members are all requested to attend.

NEWS & NOTES

A VISIT TO POCHARAM TANK

M. Shafaat Ulla

"Shafaat Saab, it has finally arrived. You must see it to believe it!" It was Aasheesh on the line and I understood what he meant. He wanted to test some new optical equipment. An instant decision was taken to test it the very next day, which luckily was a Sunday (23.1.05), and after some deliberations it was decided to go to the Pocharam Tank, about 120 km. North of Hyderabad.

Aasheesh picked me up at 6.00 in the morning in his Qualis, accompanied by his son Prashast. On the way we picked up Raajeev who had actually suggested the spot. He came with his 'gun' - more about it later. Kullu (M.S. Kulkarni) as usual, joined us at the lake.

Enroute, when we were passing through the thick Narsapur forest, we thought we saw a fleeting glimpse of a Forest Wagtail, a winter migrant from as far north as Southern Tibet. We screeched to a halt for a better look, but the bird eluded us. This also gave us the opportunity to try out the new binocs. What clarity! Crystal clear image - you feel as if you can touch the bird. While we were taking turns to admire and look through the new binocs, a charm of about 30 Redheaded Buntings came and

settled on a tree. Their beautiful and contrasting plumage was a thrilling sight. Further ahead a Short-toed Snake Eagle gracefully glided and landed on a tall dead tree near us, giving a portrait view for quite some time. We reluctantly restarted, overcoming the urge to enter the forest for more birding.

We arrived at our destination by about 9.30. It was slightly overcast, with a hint of haze in the distance. Pocharam is a huge lake but alas, it had already shrunk to about a tenth of its size. But this proved to be a blessing in disguise as the lake, or what was left of it, was a feast to the eyes as we could see a myriad birds scattered all over. We parked the car and excitedly gathered our respective gear and headed for the water's edge for about 300 meters and stopped just far enough as not to disturb the birds.

The most prominent sight in the center were 11 Flamingoes, a few of them with bright pink colour and a few dozing with their heads tucked under their wing and standing only on one leg, a bright red stick! There were about 4000 ducks, at a rough estimate, consisting of many varieties like Nakta, Brahminy, Pintail, Spotbill, Garganey, Cotton Teal, Shovellers, Redcrested Pochard and some others. Over to one side was a gaggle of Barheaded Geese and, a little beyond, on the shore we could see about 50 Openbilled Storks foraging. These were interspersed with a dozen or so Eurasian Spoonbills, probing the shallow waters with right-left-right movements with their long-handled

"spoons". And all over the place, in small clusters, were Blacktailed Godwits, more than 500 in number, and a fair sprinkling of Spotted and Common Sandpipers, Grey Herons, Egrets, River Terns and one each of Gullbilled and Blackbellied Terns – a rare sighting. Also not to forget White and Black Ibises – the white ones with black caps and the black ones with red coloured skull caps.

While we were enjoying the birding, both with the binocs and a Leica scope with a conveniently angled eye-piece

SIGHTING OF LESSER SAND PLOVERS IN

CHHATISGARH (*Charadrius mongolus*)

A.M.K. Bharos

The Lesser Sand Plover is a winter migratory species, which inhabits the coastal areas. This migration starts in August (the Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan, S. Ali and D. Ripley 584, P-154 & Birds of Indian Subcontinent, R. Grimmett, C. Inskipp and T. Inskipp, P-499)

On September 12, 2004 two birds were observed on the water's edge at Kurud Reservoir, 20 km. East of Raipur, Chhatisgarh along with 14 Little Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius dubius*), 4 Common Sandpipers (*Actitis hypoleucos*). These birds were obviously on their coastward journey.

However their sighting here suggests their being passer-by's through this region.

POSSIBLE BREEDING BY THE CUCKOO (*Cuculus canorus*) IN CHHATISGARH, INDIA

A.M.K. Bharos

The Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) is fairly well distributed in Chhatisgarh region, as it has been sighted and recorded by me at several places. The matter regarding its possible breeding in the region had lingered in my mind for some time, but it has been authenticated only recently.

On 20 August 2000, during a bird watching trip north of Raipur (Chhatisgarh) near village Nagargaon, in undulating terrain a fledgling was sighted perched on the ground and picking at maggots from cattle dung. On approach of our vehicle the bird flew about 30 metres away and settled; later it flew a further 50 metres and again settled on the ground where it froze and remained frozen for quite some time, thus providing ample opportunity to watch it. As per the plumage described in the Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan (S. Ali and S.D. Ripley Ed-1989, Vol-3, p-231), the fledglings invariably have a conspicuous white nuchal spot. This bird was identified through this point as a juvenile Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*).

The sighting of a fledgling bird suggests possible breeding of this species in the region. The foster species (Pipits, Shrikes and Babblers) also breed in this region and hence provide the Cuckoo with the adequate foster species for its eggs. The nearest authenticated location of breeding by this species is Kamptee (Nagpur, Maharashtra), which is a distance of over 300 km. from Raipur, with several suitable breeding places in between. This

particular fledgling might have been hatched anywhere nearby and could have migrated locally to the place of sighting.

Another fledgling was sighted recently on 12th September 2004, at village Badgaon 30 km. East of Raipur, perched on a rice field bund, after a while it flew to a nearby *Acacia Arabica* tree about 50 metres away.

These observations suggest that the species probably breeds in the Chhatisgarh region. Further reports of juvenile or adult birds from the region would be of help for further research.

URBAN BIRDING

"The City Bird-Brain"

Sitting in my balcony of an afternoon, I am sometimes startled by a commotion amongst the small birds that throng the food tray. And from the bushes around the stream the cry of "ware-hawk" proceeds from a dozen small birds. Such a commotion is always followed by the sharp calls of the Shikra – about the only accipitrine bird I know that is at home in the city (apart from the ubiquitous Pariah Kites). We'll take a look this month at the Shikra then. There is a small male that has made the area around the stream his home and I see him often enough to class him as a resident bird.

The Shikra is completely at home both in the city and out of it. You will see this chap in the wooded hills of Anantgiri and Narsapur and also, like as not, in the silk-cotton tree at the bottom of your garden. Or, as in my case, in the wooded lot behind the apartment block. This argues that the Shikra is on the way to becoming an urban bird. While it would be too much to say that I am pleased at that prospect, still the idea has appeal and also argues that the Shikra may well have decided to adopt the "If you can't beat them, then join them..." approach. A bird that has adopted this approach deserves to be well rewarded – a statement that is guaranteed to earn me the wrath of many a chicken farmer. The chicken farmer has learnt, to his misfortune, that the presence of the Shikra near his brooding pens generally means disappearing chicks... and the odd pullet as well!

There was a time when a cage full of small birds (munias and such-like) in the verandah was a magnet for the Shikra. I have lost a couple of munias through this method. And I also have a photograph of a Shikra, full mantled and furious, clutching at a cage in which was a flock of sparrows. The sparrows, be it added, were considerably cleverer than the munias. They sat carefully in the middle of the cage where they were quite safe from the clutching talons, and peered up amusedly at the Shikra as it tried in vain to insert its foot into the cage and grab one of them. Foiled in this venture, the hawk took wing, found a thermal and started soaring – a sight quite common in the middle of the city nowadays. The number of glass buildings built nowadays is surely a contributing factor to this – the heat reflecting off the tarmac of the roads and the reflective glass and concrete of these buildings is a very good substitute for a natural thermal – hence the soaring propensities of the Shikras have been increased.

Has anyone taken a really good look at this bird – there is something dashing about him. The male in particular is a fine looking creature with his bloodshot eyes (as of a tippler who has wine rather too well!!!). A very compact fellow also and a

fearsome predator to boot, as the sparrows, munias, bulbuls and robins know only too well. His wife doesn't know any liquid stronger than water and hence her eyes at least, are clear yellow as a hawk's should be. She is also the larger of the two – as a hawk should be who has the onerous duties of looking after a clutch of three to four little bandits. If she were smaller, who would control the father of the chicks when he was off catching prey? Only by virtue of her larger size is she able to keep her husband on a short string and ensure that the little ones get the full benefit of whatever prey father might catch.

In the old days, when falconry was a much-practiced art, the Shikra was termed a member of the family of "short-winged hawks". The term was generally used to distinguish these birds from the "long-winged" falcons. Short-winged hawks are more at home in the woods and thickets than in the open air. This is because nature has not meant them to be bloodhounds, but rather terriers. The falcons, having the advantage of speed, think nothing of a lightning dive that brings down their prey. The hawks, on the other hand, not having that kind of speed to their advantage, have devised a much better method – they stalk their prey using the trees and bushes in their chosen habitat to their advantage. Observe the hawk jumping noiselessly from tree to bush, from bush to creeper, and from creeper to the fence post, the while keeping a wary eye on the flock of busily squabbling babblers on the ground. When he is within range, a quick dive and the hawk is away with the struggling babbler in his talons. And at such a time, it behoves him to find himself a nice thickly foliated tree in which to hide, before the rest of the babbler flock collect their wits and turn the tables. I have seen a flock of seven babblers so harrying a Shikra that had managed catch one of their comrades that it dropped the prey and flew off. The babbler, none the worse for a few scratches, continued its interrupted foraging.

Yet, with all these points in its favour, the Shikra is not an intelligent bird. I have kept a few from time to time, but they have not the intelligence one likes to see in birds that live by their wits. I suppose that really is the difference; since the hawk does not have to live by its wits but more by its brawn. Having said that, they do provide some amusement at times. The male I have earlier mentioned sometimes lands on the roof of the apartment block opposite and sits hungrily eyeing the birds enjoying the grain tray in my balcony. At such times the sparrows, showing much cunning, hurriedly hop under my chair and, from that vantage point, cock-a-snook at the hawk. Even with his limited intelligence, the hawk knows better than to follow his prey under my chair – though I have known of one that followed its prey (a dove) into the drawing room and pulled the dove out from under the sofa: (though I must add that there was no-one actually sitting on the sofa at that time).

If you have a garden around your house, you must have seen the Shikra at least once. In my younger days, we were often visited by the birds and I remember once seeing a very young chap sitting composedly in a neem tree in the garden. Being young and much interested in falconry in those days of long ago, I tried hard to catch this youngster using a variety of interesting gadgets such as a drop-cage or a bamboo sliver liberally coated with bird-lime. None of these contraptions had any effect on the little chap that continued to sit on the high branch, giving a very good imitation of a taxidermist's advertisement. Only when

evening approached and the calls of the adults became audible did the youngster show signs of animation. And when mother landed next to him with a green lizard in her beak, he became positively frantic with excitement. One would have thought he hadn't eaten in a month! The female proceeded to stuff the lizard into his beak and the young chap proceeded to wolf down the food with every indication of enjoyment. At last there was only the tail hanging out of the hawk's beak – giving a funny impression that the Shikra had suddenly sprouted an exceedingly long goatee, such as the Chinamen in cartoons are wont to wear. Having got all that down his crop he gave a couple of hiccups (as well he might...!), wagged his tail and settled down to his normal pastime of imitating a stuffed bird.

A large tamarind or neem tree in your immediate neighbourhood would be a good place in which to keep an eye out for the Shikra's nest. They tend to build in such places or, if they find an old crow's nest, they will gladly take possession. I wonder if this would render them liable to prosecution under the land-grabbing act. Might give a good judge pause for thought if a pair of crows suddenly appeared and demanded justice for the takeover of their home and hearth. To ensure that such a complaint is never registered, the hawks will usually chase the crows a goodly distance if they see one in the vicinity of the impounded nest. Having got rid of the "intruders" (or rightful owners, as the case may be), the hawks will painstakingly repair what damages exist in the structure and set about the stern task of bringing up their olive branches. And all this is happening right in front of your eyes – in the garden in fact. What better proof that the Shikra is now well on the way to becoming a corporate member of the urban birds club! Keep those eyes open and you are bound to see one not very far away. And I can give you one unfailing pointer. If you happen to be anywhere in the vicinity of the Moazzam Jahi Market, then cock an eye upwards at the minaret that houses the clock. There is generally always a small male Shikra ensconced there, surrounded by loudly cooing pigeons. I have often seen him soaring in the area also. That is a sure sighting if you are looking for a Shikra in mid-city. There also used to be one on the Southern minar of the Charminar monument – but I have not seen him for quite some time now so I don't know if he is still there or has shifted quarters. He was a source of much trouble to the wily bird-catchers of the old city. Long aware of the existence of the hawk, these good citizens did their best to add him as the star attraction to their cages (there is a very ready market for these birds from the arab sheiks who sometimes visit our shores in quest of birds raptorial). By dint of good-luck and the huge population of people in the area he had designated as home, the hawk escaped many an attempt on his liberty – though he once left one tail feather in the net of an enterprising catcher. Keep an eye open and, if you happen to see this chap, I am sure he would remember the strange human who stood under his minar and stared up at him for minutes on end.

So, whether you are going out into the wild areas this month, or plan to spend the days relaxing in the garden with a good book – keep an eye (or an ear) peeled and you are sure to be rewarded with a sighting. Keep watching the Shikra this month. Until next time, Happy Birding...!

BIRD OF THE MONTH - THE NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

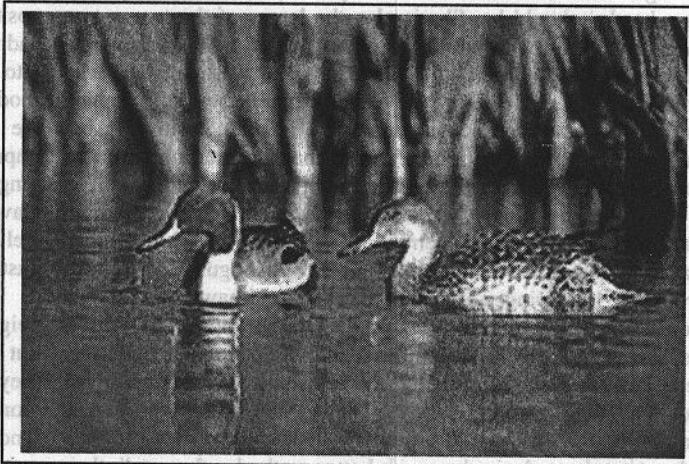
The Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) is one of the commonest of the winter migrants that come to India with the inward migration of wintering waterfowl. The bird spreads throughout the country and settles, in large rafts, on medium to large sized jeels, marshes and lakes and also in the brackish waters of coastal estuaries. The drake is remarkable for the two long central tail feathers that project out beyond the end of the tail for a considerable distance and give the species their common name. The duck on the other hand, has a slightly longer than normal tail but lacks the two "pins" that distinguish the drake.

The Northern Pintail duck breeds from Alaska east to Quebec and south to southern California, Nebraska, and Maine. It winters south to Central America and the West Indies. It is also found in Europe and Asia. Also called sprig, they are found throughout the world. During summers they are found mainly in the Northern Hemisphere as far south as Poland and Mongolia in Eurasia and California in North America. In the winter, they migrate to the Southern Hemisphere, including parts of Africa and all of Mexico. Some Pintail even fly all the way to Hawaii to spend the winter.

Northern Pintail ducks live in marshes, prairie ponds, and tundra. Pintail are found in marshes, ponds, lakes, rivers, canals, and grain fields, such as rice, oats, wheat, and barley.

Most of the Pintail's diet is made up of the seeds of aquatic plants like pondweeds, sedges, grasses, and smartweeds. It also eats small aquatic animals. Pintail feed on grain fields, including rice, wheat, barley, and oats. They also feed on foods that naturally occur, such as alkali and hardstem bulrush seeds, sago pondweeds, insects, cladocera, and widgeon grass.

People are the main predators of adult Pintails, but they are also preyed upon by wild cats, jackals and coyotes (in its summer range). To avoid predation they take flight. Farmers, during the process of working in their fields, destroy nests. Crows, magpies, gulls, skunks, ground squirrels, coyotes, foxes, badgers, and raccoons also destroy nests and eat the eggs (in the breeding grounds).



PIGEON POST

"I very much enjoyed reading the articles 'Urban Birding' by The City Bird-Brain. Who ever he/she is, please convey my good wishes." - *Asad Rahmani*

"One of the most fascinating methods of finding your own food in the African bush is to follow the Honeyguide, a drab-looking little bird which calls to passing animals, hoping to lead them to the honey it has found.

"You follow and it flies ahead, a short distance at a time, then waits for you to catch up, until it gets to the bees' nest, where it sits quietly. After you open the nest and take the honey, it is the custom to leave the bird a piece of comb, which it eats, together with the grubs inside.

"African lore has it that if you fail in this courtesy, the next time you follow a honeyguide it will lead you to a leopard or something equally unpleasant." -- James Clark, (The Star - Johannesburg)

Ed. Note: One species of Honeyguide bird is found in India also - the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide (Indicator xanthonotus). This species is only found in the Himalayan foothills.

For Private Circulation Only

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PROGRAMME - March

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 24-iv-2005: Kasu Brahmananda Reddy (KBR) National Park, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad: This will be a morning trip. Sightings of Blackwinged Kites and Ashy Swallow-Shrikes can be expected. Plenty of Warblers and scrubland birds, lots of Peafowl and other members of the pheasant family such as Partridge (both Grey and Painted) and Quail. The lake is almost dry and this could mean the absence of the resident water birds such as Spotbills and Lesser Whistling Teal. Carry plenty of water and snacks. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 18-iv-2005, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the press.

NEWS & NOTES

KAWAL WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By

Sharada Annamaraju

Kawal WLS is an 893 sq km tiger county in Adilabad district with a dry deciduous forest consisting mainly of teak and bamboo trees. On the 6th of January 2005, eleven of us, including members of the BSAP and the Hyderabad Tiger Conservation Society (HYTICOS), boarded the bus to Unoor at night at Imliban bus station. We reached Jannaram, a small town, at about four in the morning of 7th Jan and were put up at a dormitory close to the town in the forest itself.

A short nap and a light breakfast later, we got ready for the first part of the two and a half day trip. The trek to Dongapalle started at 8:00 a.m. We drove into the forest in a jeep for part of the way, and then walked on foot. Following is a list of birds we saw during the two hours of walk:

Red vented bulbuls *Pycnonotus cafer*
Small green bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*
Rose ringed parakeets *Psittacula krameri*
White breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
Crested hawk eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus*
Plum headed parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*
Common Wood-shrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus*
Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*
Yellow throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*
Black Headed oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*

White Eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*
Cuckooshrike (? species)
Coppersmith Barbet (heard) *Megalaima haemacephala*
Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*
Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*
Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
Paradise flycatcher (female) *Terpsiphone paradisi*
Great Tit *Parus major*
Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*
Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocerus*
Tickell's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis*
White bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*
Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*

After the short trek, we returned to the dormitory and rested for some time. At around 2:30 p.m. we headed towards a small udipi hotel, which we had colonized for those two and a half days! A good heavy lunch, and we were off to the Kadam reservoir. This spot looked like a good one with calm waters and forested hills all around. Here we saw the following:

Asian Open-billed stork *Anastomus oscitans*
Common swallows *Hirundo rustica*
House swifts *Apus affinis*
Brahminy Duck *Tadorna ferruginea*
Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*
Large egret *Casmerodius albus*

Median egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*
 Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*
 Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
 Little cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*
 Red-wattled lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
 Pond heron *Ardeola grayii*
 Brown headed gull *Larus brunnicephalus*
 Black headed gull *Larus ridibundus*
 Wire-tailed swallows *Hirundo smithii*
 Pied wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*
 Small blue kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

It was now growing dark and we, along with our luggage, headed off to a Gond hamlet in Mysempet. On the way we caught a fleeting glimpse of a Blackbuck in the forest. However we saw a Chinkara for quite a long duration. We reached the hamlet at 6:00 in the evening just as it was getting dark. As soon as we got out of the jeep we saw a bright red glow in the distance, the glow of a forest fire on a hillock. The villagers said it could be an accidental fire caused by a lighted beedi carelessly flung by someone.

In the hamlet we were put up in the lone concrete structure present, a school having three rooms. The headmaster and principal of the school were on leave; so all the children of the hamlet were having a vacation until they returned! Though the village had electric supply, there was none during the period of our stay. That was all the more better because, we could do some excellent star gazing with Mr. Tej Kumar pointing out some of the more obscure constellations we can't even think of viewing in our brightly lit cities! We had to use torches to move around until the tribals built a small fire, which lit up the area. While we sat on the charpays provided by the helpful tribals, and our shadows danced on the walls of the huts due to the flickering fire, we sat listening to Mr. Waheed, Divisional forest officer (DFO). He had travelled a long way in his jeep to the Gond hamlet in Mysempet so that we could meet him. A remarkable person, he spoke of his work and how he had become a DFO. We sat listening eagerly to his experience with an agitated sloth bear that had attacked him when he was in the forests of Srisailam. (Later in the morning he showed us the scars on his hand, left by the wounds made by the bear). Here, in the forests, time seemed to have had come to a still. We had a light meal of dal, rice and boiled eggs cooked by the tribals. After a good night's sleep, we woke up to cocks crowing all over the hamlet.

8th January 2005: A few of us overslept and had to hurry up getting ready for the morning trek in the forest around the hamlet! However we were not too late and we didn't miss out on the wonderful morning the forest had planned for us. While in the hamlet itself we saw a Bay backed shrike *Lanius vittatus* and a Rufous backed shrike *Lanius schach*. We were leaving the hamlet for the forest when Mr. Waheed saw lots of Chital skins hanging on a wire in another hut. Upon inquiry one tribal told us that these were for usage as head dresses during Sankranti. Not probing further we moved on into the forest where we saw amongst other common species of birds, an Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*, lots of Common Hoopoes *Upupa epops*, a Goldenbacked woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* and a Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda* jousting for toddy on a

palm tree! A little further on we saw a White-browed fantail flycatcher *Rhipidura aureola*, pirouetting amongst tree branches and soon after we saw a Shikra *Accipiter badius*. All along the walk Mr. Waheed spoke to us about wildlife and was pointing out different species of trees to us. Near a Bamboo thicket we saw a Tickell's blue flycatcher launching sallies after insects. Though we didn't see any Nilgai we could constantly see piles of its droppings on the forest trail.

Further up we saw a tall *Terminalia arjuna* tree with the ascending and descending claw marks of a sloth bear. Trekking pretty deep into the forest we found tiger scat which upon analysis showed that the Tiger had eaten a Chinkara! Coming upon a small pool of water everyone settled down and had a breakfast of biscuits and fruit-bread. While every one was busy talking about wildlife and what could be done for the wildlife of Kawal, just about twelve feet away from us, in the shade of the trees there was a male Paradise flycatcher on a perch, his tail looping the loop and trailing behind him whenever he flew. In the same thicket there were a Great tit and a common tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*. On the ground below the trees was a female Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* strutting around. And all the while we were breakfasting, we could hear a Large green barbet calling out. On the damp sand surrounding the pool there were beautiful, glistening, jewel like butterflies. We saw Baronettes, Common pierrots, Common sailors and a Blue admiral. Apart from butterflies we also saw many moths, wasps and tree-hoppers. One tree-hopper was caught by Mr. Tej Kumar and everyone was given a chance to look at the insect with a long snout, through a magnifying lens.

We returned to the hamlet at 12:30 p.m. and rested in our rooms for some time while a few others went around speaking to tribals and taking pictures of them. We had lunch at 1:00 p.m. After seeing off Mr. Waheed, a few members chose to go back to Jannaram with another DFO, who kindly offered to drop them back at the dormitory in his jeep. The rest of us sent the heavy part of our luggage with them and rested until 3:15 in our rooms. At 3:30 p.m. we left the hamlet for Udhampur lake, guided by one of the tribals. This time of the day was pretty hot and we carried lots of water in our knapsacks. We walked very fast because we wanted to make it to Udhampur before sunset as the lake was about 7 kilometers away. However we were not in a great hurry, and stopped occasionally to look at a pygmy woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*, a Black-headed oriole and a Tree shrew. We cleaned up the entire forest trail of any plastic packets we saw, to prevent wild animals from eating them. Coming upon a dry river-bed we saw some sand miners illegally carting off sand. A few members of our group made enquiries and took their pictures to record the incident. We resumed walking. But, we took a wrong direction and reached a very small water body, two kilometers away from Udhampur. We rested on the shore after the long trek and watched many Cattle egrets, a lone Black winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, a White breasted kingfisher, a Small blue kingfisher, a Red-wattled lapwing, an Indian roller, Black Drongos, Collared doves *Streptopelia decaocto*, a Pond heron and Small green bee-eaters taking a dip in the water. We climbed over a bund near the water body and came into green fields, where we saw Pied mynas *Sturnus contra*. We walked on the bunds between the fields and

came to a village. Here we bid farewell to the guide and thanked him for his help. We also complemented his wife who had cooked those wonderful meals for us in the hamlet. Washing off the grime off our faces and hands with water from a hand pump in the village, we moved along the road when we reached a small village fair. Here we happened to buy some oranges, which looked and smelt like oranges from the outside but, upon peeling the skin they looked like *mosambis* and when we tasted them we couldn't help making faces as they tasted sourer than lemons! We had tea at the village while watching the sun setting in the horizon and then caught an auto-rickshaw to Jannaram. On the way we saw a fire blazing up slowly by the roadside. The driver was asked to stop immediately and a few people ran towards the fire, breaking a few tree branches with leaves on them off a tree, and proceeded to whack the fire out. Twenty minutes later, the fire was put off safely. Reaching our dormitory at 7:00 p.m., we freshened up, had a good heavy dinner and fell into a deep sleep after the tiring trek.

At 6:00 in the morning of the 9th of January, we all got into the jeep and drove towards Gangapur in the forest. Except hearing the call of a White-breasted kingfisher at twilight, we didn't see many birds by the roadside. On the onward trip to Gangapur we saw a Red Spurfowl *Gallus gallus spadicea* and a Mongoose. We saw that in many areas there were trees felled down and certain areas had even been completely devoid of trees. Upon reaching Gangapur, we asked a few villagers whether they knew anything of the tree felling. They said that all the trees had been cut by the Gonds to build a new village. The tree stumps had markings on them, which indicated that the forest officials already knew of the activity. On the way back from Gangapur we had several beautiful sightings of Langur, Cheetal, and Nilgai. We reached the highway and from there drove towards Dostnagar. We diverted off the road onto a path leading through jungle, thickly populated by bamboo trees. We were requested to maintain silence as this happened to be an active area for a tigress who would often be seen with her cubs. We drove on in silence towards a *machan*, hoping to sight the elusive tiger. But we didn't see one. We reached the *machan*, near a dry riverbed. We walked down onto the bed and in the sand, found a shallow pit dug by a Leopard! One could see its pugmark in the sand. It was explained by the organizers of the trip, Mr. Asif Siddiqui and Mr. Imran Siddiqui that thirsty animals would come to the river and dig a shallow pit to drink the water underneath. We removed some amount of sand near a boulder, and we could see the water surfacing for ourselves. It was now that we hit upon the idea of digging a waterhole for the animals! Someone found a small bucket and few of us found pieces of strong bark, which could be used as digging tools. First we scooped out some of the sand with hand and then used our digging tools to widen and deepen the hole. As soon as fresh, wet sand appeared beside the waterhole,

scores of dazzling butterflies and wasps made their way and settled on the sand, absorbing moisture out of it. When enough water appeared, we got down to the work of shaping the sides of the water hole and smoothening them. We packed the sand down with our hands and feet, and banded the sides with stones and logs we found. We were in the process of shovelling, digging and bunding for about forty-five minutes. Once the task was completed, everyone stood back and surveyed their handiwork proudly. The entire procedure was captured on cameras and video cameras that we were carrying with us. We had the palms of our hands glistening with sand and some other shiny substance, which we were told, was mica. We washed our hands off the sand and mica and left the riverbed for the bank. All of us were merrily talking about the work we had just completed and hoped sincerely that the tigress with her cubs would come to the waterhole and appreciate our work! We made up tales of her coming and bathing in the pool at night with her cubs bounding about merrily beside her. (**Editors note: While this is a laudable gesture, did anyone check to ensure that this digging is not drying up any other animal dig further downstream.**) We emptied our bottles of water to the last drop as we were parched after the strenuous work. We climbed back into the jeep and drove once again in silence through the bamboo. Unfortunately we didn't see a tiger this time too. We reached the road and returned to our dormitory. We packed our belongings, as it was time to leave. We got into the two jeeps waiting for us outside with our luggage and headed for the udupi hotel for one last time. Over lunch we talked of the most memorable moments of the trip and everyone agreed that the drive through the bamboo was the greatest. Even though we didn't see a tiger, we could almost imagine an orange and black form moving in the distance. We decided that, though none of us saw the lord of the jungle he certainly would have seen us. Other animals we couldn't see throughout the trip were the sloth bear and the leopard. The act of digging the waterhole stood second in the list of memorable moments. The entire butterfly species count, at the end of the trip had come to twenty five and the number of bird species we saw stood at fifty-four approximately. Also, we got a tiny glimpse into the tremendous amount of work that goes into conserving our wilds. Our lunch over, we came out of the hotel and got our baggage out of the jeeps. We thanked the organizers for the pleasurable trip, a trip all of us would remember for a long time to come. We got onto the bus to Hyderabad, which was waiting across the road. We settled down quickly and soon the engine of the bus came to life. The vehicle moved slowly down the road and we were all waving goodbye to the others outside. The bus picked up speed and before long Kawal and its forests, receded into the distance behind us...

BIRD OF THE MONTH - ROSERINGED PARAKEET (*Psittacula krameri*)

The Roseringed Parakeet is the commonest member of the Parakeet family and is often met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. It is a bold and noisy bird and its loud calls will often attract attention much before the bird itself is seen. Seeing them is far more difficult because their green plumage blends with the trees perfectly and, often enough, you may be looking directly at the bird but will be unable to see it until an incautious flutter or a jump from branch to branch gives them away.

The birds found in the city are sometimes thought to be, for the most part, relatives of escaped birds. This is quite a likely point as the bird is frequently encountered in cages – being good mimics, they are much fancied as pets. Not a few of these manage to escape or are released by the owners and they then settle down in the city itself. Their diet does not require much in the nature of wilderness and if they have a few fruit bearing trees in the area, they do quite well. A loaded Banyan tree is a magnet for these birds and they can be quite raucous around the tree when the banyan is in fruit.



The Roseringed Parakeet is found throughout the Indian subcontinent, though they are noticeably less common in the arid areas of the Sindh desert. Otherwise, they do quite well throughout their range so long as they can find areas that provide sufficient large trees to nest and roost in and a few fruit trees for their diet. They are hole-nesting birds and their strong beaks are a very useful tool for them to excavate their hole nests in the trunks and branches of trees.

Loss of habitat and incessant persecution for cage pets has resulted in the decline of the species throughout their range. Although they are still quite extensively found throughout the region, there are signs that they are not as numerous as they used to be. The birds need protection and that can only be got through the change in attitudes of people. Otherwise the Roseringed Parakeet may well appear in the list of highly-threatened birds if the present attitude remains unchanged.

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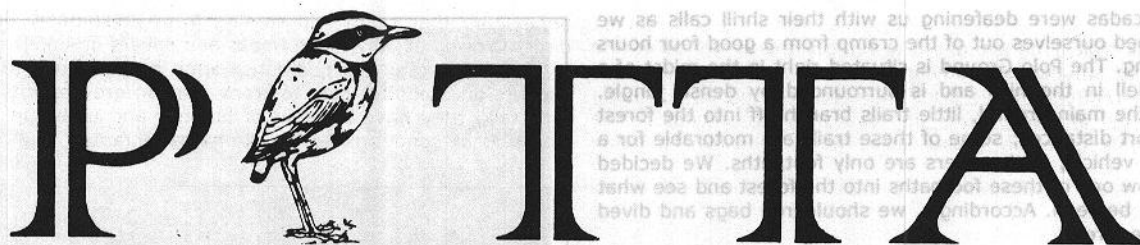
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Field Outing

Sunday, 22-v-2005, 6.30 a.m.: Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad

This will be a morning trip. Sightings of scrubland birds are assured. There should be some resident waterbirds on the lake also. All three Kingfisher species and maybe Small Greenbilled Malkoha as well. If really lucky, then the nesting pair of Grey Hornbills near the Tortoise enclosures. Plenty of Warblers and scrubland birds, lots of Peafowl and other members of the pheasant family such as Partridge (both Grey and Painted) and Quail. Indian Moorhens could well be raising their family on the pond near the raptor enclosures. They also have a very cunningly concealed nest on that very pond; see if you can spot it. Carry plenty of water and snacks. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 16-v-2005, 6 p.m.: Vidyananya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the press

NEWS & NOTES

Of Strawberries and Cream

A TRIP TO THE MAHABALESHWAR HILLS – 23.04.2005

By Kalidas Chitambar

The trip actually began on the evening of the 22nd, when the Royal Enfield Club of the office got together to plan a ride – the venue was fixed at Mahabaleshwar and the timing was settled that we would ride out of Pune at 5.00 a.m. which would mean that we would be able to breakfast at Mahabaleshwar at around 8.30 – 9.00 in the morning. Perfect timing, we all said, and so the trip was arranged.

Saturday morning, we finally got off to a fairly early start at around 7.45 a.m. (so much for the 5.00 a.m. planned departure!). Still, we made good time on the road and the scenery was perfectly lovely, especially around the Karjat Ghat. Traffic on the road was rather brisk and so we didn't see all that many interesting birds though there were sightings of Blackwinged Kites and a few early flocks of Small Green Bee-eaters. The bulk of the excitement, as far as the birds were concerned, was waiting for us at journey's end. Stopping for occasional tea breaks and sundry halts to admire the scenery, we crossed the Krishna River around

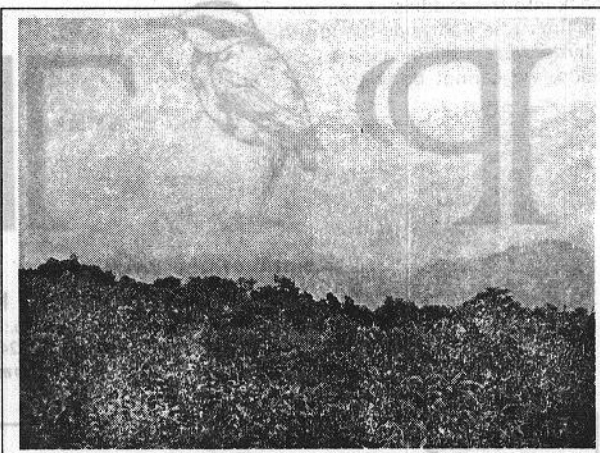
9.00, being rewarded by the sighting of about 8 Openbilled Storks on the wing. From there on, we turned off the main highway and the scenery changed dramatically as we started the ascent of the Mahabaleshwar Ghat. Lush greenery was all around us now and the air was a good three to four degrees cooler than it was on the plains. About 30 km. before Mahabaleshwar, we stopped at a small village called Vai, which boasted a very ancient temple. I am told that it was built before Shivaji sat the throne of the Maratha Kingdom, which makes it around 700 – 800 years old; quite a respectable age. The temple was made almost entirely of black granite and the façade and internal structures were extremely interesting. (I have made a private resolve to visit the place again with a better camera than the phone-camera I was armed with on this trip). From here on, it was a straight (though winding) climb into Mahabaleshwar, which was finally achieved at around 11.15. We roared through the town and finally pulled up at the far end of the Polo Ground just as the clocks chimed 11.45 a.m.!

The cicadas were deafening us with their shrill calls as we stretched ourselves out of the cramp from a good four hours of riding. The Polo Ground is situated right in the midst of a little dell in the hills and is surrounded by dense jungle. From the main ground, little trails branch off into the forest for short distances; some of these trails are motorable for a sturdy vehicle, while others are only footpaths. We decided to follow one of these footpaths into the forest and see what was to be seen. Accordingly, we shouldered bags and dived into the forest.

The air was alive with bird calls. For a short while I bitterly regretted my decision to make this trip without my binoculars. This, I reflected ruefully, is one of the penalties one pays for being a trifle too sure of one's eyes and ability to identify without a sure sighting. Still, being deprived of sight is not being deprived of sound, and I determined to put my ears to better use than they have been in the past. Amongst the first sounds I identified were the calls of the Green Barbet. The loud "Kutur ... Kutur ... Kutur..." is unmistakable when heard in the densely wooded hills. Simple too, is the identification of the White-browed Bulbul from its calls. Those harsh chattering screams can proceed from but one throat. In the midst of this cacophony, the drone of the cicadas continued unabated. Then, as we went deeper into the woods other, more liquid and musical, calls became audible. Once more, thoughts turned regretfully to the lack of the binoculars. But these were not forthcoming, so let's try and stalk these chaps and see who is making that lovely music in the hills. Easier said than done - ever tried stalking birds over a carpet of dried leaves. It can't be done, believe me. That crunching of dozens of leaves under ones' feet is audible for long distances.

So then it was decided that if we are not able to go to the birds, let the birds come to us. Accordingly, we waited and soon the makers of the calls became visible through the dense foliage. Redwhiskered Bulbuls put in an appearance first, and were quickly followed by the perky little black-and-white Magpie Robins. Now the notes of the song changed and a liquid warbling was heard. We were enchanted by the sound, but the minstrel continued hidden. Sundry flutterings in the canopy were seen, and the makers quickly identified as Common Wood-Shrike, Redvented Bulbuls, Green Barbets, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher and Purple Sunbirds. But the warbling continued and the warbler was strangely retiring. We persevered and finally the reward came. A flutter at the top of the giant tree we were standing under, and there was the singer. A Shama... acknowledged to be the best singer of the subcontinent: A well deserved title. If the rest of the birds are the strawberries, then this is definitely the cream of the sightings!

We continued walking, not notching up a great many other species, but enjoying the sweet music of their calls, which followed us as we wound our way deeper into the wooded hills. The trail finally came out of the jungle and merged with a dirt road that seemed quite motorable. We parked ourselves on convenient stones and tree stumps and discussed further operations; eventually coming to a consensus on lunch and then a ride into the forest through one of the trails. So, returning to where the vehicles awaited, we climbed on and headed back into the town in search of a suitable hostelry where we could quell the growling in the innards and perhaps take off our shoes and wiggle the cramp out of our toes!



Having ordered lunch with a lavish hand, we proceeded to laze around and listen to the chatter of the Mynas in the trees around the hotel. Barbets continued to call from the vicinity of the large trees in the nearby churchyard. Finishing our refueling, we climbed back onto the bikes and headed out to find those elusive trails through the forest. En-route a halt was indicated at Bombay Point (apparently, on clear days one can see the city of Mumbai from that point). By now, the weather had changed, there was a hint of rain in the air and the hills were misty. Bombay was strangely retiring, but something else was not - a magnificent Bonelli's Eagle soaring *under* us. It is not often that one is privileged to see these regal birds flying under one, so I made good use of the sighting to commit to memory the plumage of the bird in flight from above. Just how I will be putting this fact to use, I regret I cannot say... but doubtless a time will come when I will be able to delve into my reluctant brain and put the memory today acquired to use! However, being that as it may, the sighting of Bonelli's Eagle goes into the growing list of birds for the day.

Finally giving up our chances of seeing Bombay, we pulled out of the point and found the trail that leads into the forest, a trail that rejoices in the name of "Dan To Beer Sheeba Ride". Now, by any standards a Royal Enfield makes a great deal of sound, but when we have three of them taking dry-leaf-carpeted trails through the overhanging wooded hill terrain, then "deafening uproar" is a rather understated term. Forget being able to hear, or see, birds now. The latter was not true, because we did manage to see something extremely interesting. A Crested Hawk-Eagle flushed from its perch and disappeared around the boles of the trees. A little further on, we flushed it again; enough for a fair sighting before the bird disappeared into the forest farther away from the trail where it could ruminate in peace without being disturbed by noisy machines... The ride continued and we eventually regained the highway again.

Stopping at the exit point, we refreshed ourselves with cold water and a breather. At this point, the cicadas again began to drone and a couple of Barbets also added their mite. But for the most part, the hills were silent. I did manage to hear a strange clucking in the forest but it may or may not have been a Spurfowl. We eventually hit the saddle again and, the day being now well advanced, it was unanimously decided to head for the strawberry orchards. Getting there, we stuffed ourselves with rich mixtures of strawberries and cream and

so back into the saddles once more for the long ride home. A great time was had and, though there can be no doubt that the birds were well pleased to see the backs of the Royal Enfields, we cannot deny that they afforded us not a little pleasure by their presence and the beauty of their songs. The pristine forest beckons strongly again so be prepared for further notes on the birds of those misty hills...

Large Cormorants in Adilabad Town

By M.S. Kulkarni

In the month of March 2005, I had a chance to visit Adilabad Town. It was quite cold in the mornings, as, a few days back, it had rained about 8 cm. in a single day. Therefore, nearly all the small tanks around the town were having sufficient water levels.

The town has a large water tank called "Bada Talab" on the eastern side. As a birdwatcher, I made a point of being at the tank at around 6.00 a.m. This particular tank had sufficient water with around 30% of its surface area filled with water hyacinth. Birds started arriving on the water-body as the eastern horizon became brighter. On the periphery of the tank I could notice Purple Herons, Pond Herons, Indian Moorhen and one Night Heron becoming uncomfortable. I was wondering at the lack of waterbirds as the tank was quite large in size. And a short while later, this question was answered as a flock of 30 Large Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) started landing on the water. Soon after this flock, a batch of 17 Little Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*), landed on the water. After this, flock after flock of Large and Little Cormorants started coming onto the tank. Within the flocks, I noted both adult and juvenile birds. In all, around 175 Large Cormorants and 95 Little Cormorants were counted.



At 8.00 a.m. human disturbing factors started to appear. Within one hour, all the birds, with the exception of Purple Moorhen and a few Pond Herons, took wing and flew in many directions. The Large Cormorants flew further ahead to the eastern side (?). There might have been another water-body on this side. After some time, I could see small groups of people (around 35) catching fish with ordinary nets and with other traditional means. This is the routine scene of activities on this water tank.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

Looking up at the sky in the hot afternoons of summer, it is impossible not to descry half-a-dozen or so brown specks that effortlessly ride the thermals that radiate off the hot tarmac and concrete of the city. These brown specks could be bits of paper or clouds of dust or, more often than not, that most ubiquitous bird – the Pariah Kites. If they are kites, then take a good look for these birds repay it. For the Common Pariah Kite is perhaps the only raptorial bird that has managed to make itself completely at home in the city. They are everywhere and, most of the time, they make good use of the fact.

A kite, up close, is a most handsome bird, even though his short legs are set closer to his chest than is aesthetically appealing. It gives them a rather top-heavy look, as though the bird is going to fall off his perch from the weight of his body getting too much concentrated in his nether regions. But see the chap in flight – and the bird is transformed. That sailing flight is anything but top-heavy. The bird simply swims through the air (even the heavily polluted city air!). That long, forked tail is a most useful rudder and propels the

birds around obstacles and in and out of busy streets. And if there is a morsel or so lying on the road, that quick swoop down, grab and effortless soar up back into the air, will be the envy of many a dive-bomber pilot and the bane of the harassed motorist who has his work already cut out trying to avoid the pedestrian without having to worry about birds too. The motorist need have no qualms. The birds are far more adept at avoiding collisions than is the pedestrian! Walking in the fish-market one day, I heard loud cries of rage from one of the vendors. The cause of this commotion – a Kite that had swooped in and helped itself to a half-dozen or so of his best stock. Looking around we saw the chap sitting composedly on the very top of a nearby street lamp and wolfing down the fish he had picked up, quite oblivious to the, by now, almost incoherent fish-vendor, dancing with rage at the foot of the pole.

The old man used to tell that in his boyhood days, the youngsters were cautioned against venturing outdoors with edible items clutched in their hands. The reason given for this was Kites (though I now suspect that it was more of a

device to ensure that eating be confined to the dining room...). However, if taken in conjunction with the aforementioned story of the fishmonger, it may not be too far off the mark.

I remember that in my younger days, when I was much interested in birds of the hawk tribe, there was a pair of Kites that used to roost on the top of a hoarding on the building opposite the house. These chaps were invariably to be seen there most evenings, and often even during the daytime. One of these chaps was most interested in the various accipitrine birds that used to keep appearing in the garden below him. At one point, there was a matter of two Kestrels, a Shikra and a Redheaded Merlin together and the Kite kept swooping in with his eyes ablaze with curiosity at the menagerie in the garden. While I was not unduly disturbed by these aerial sorties, the presence of this chap was having unfortunate effects on my Shikra because she did not at all approve of this large fellow coming down and staring at her. A few judicious "shoos" and waving of hands finally managed to persuade the kite that its presence was not desired so, from that moment on, it contented itself with staying on its perch on the hoarding and peering down with interest at the goings-on in the garden.

The Kites that one observes soaring in the cities are generally always the common Pariah Kites. However, there is a cousin of these birds that also sometimes puts in an appearance. This is the Blackeared Kite; a bird not so bold as its commoner cousin, but nonetheless a useful bird to have around to keep the streets clean. Although the crows also look after this last function, and while I would not underrate their usefulness in that regard, still the sight of a crow sitting down to breakfast on a dead rat in the middle of the road is not a pleasant picture. The kites, on the other hand, remove the nuisance and what they do with it afterwards does not concern us.

Pariah Kites are known to build their nests in the city. Large Tamarind, Neem or Mango trees are the preferred sites as these trees have considerable shade within their branches that the Kites find useful when they have chicks to brood and shade from the sun. At the same time, since they have converted to urban birds, they have learnt to exploit available resources to their advantage. There was a note in Mayura once about a kite nest that was almost entirely composed of binding wires! Nesting sites too are now being changed, given that the city is not a conducive environment for large trees of the kind that the kites use for building their nests in. So the birds are now utilizing other more handy resources. The electricity pylons near Railway Stations generally always have a couple of pairs of these birds nesting on them. They are a source of much annoyance to the crows that also use these pylons to build their own nests. Interestingly enough, the nests of the Pariah Kites

also attract a host of other unlikely visitors. I remember seeing a nest once in a residential part of town. The nest was not entirely interesting but what made it so was a sparrow nest suspended underneath the superstructure of the kite nest. A very neat arrangement - with the sparrows using, as the roof over their heads, the floor of the nest of the kite. What was interesting about it was that though it was obvious that the sparrows had young in their nest, there was no hint of the kites attempting to bury through the floor of their nest and helping themselves to a free meal. One can only assume that the kites took their duties as hosts very seriously. A note on this unusual guest later appeared in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society also.

In the days when I was much interested in falconry, I nursed a desire to own and train one of these very interesting hawks. Completely forgetful of the fact that the talons of these birds would be a sea of tetanus-causing bacteria, on account of the putrid flesh and carrion that they eat, I used to always try and obtain one. Happily, I never succeeded in my venture and I do not doubt that the kites too were extremely glad that one persecutor at least, had laid down his weapons and contented himself with merely watching them from afar now. In later years, my ambition to handle one of these birds was realised when I was helping at an animal shelter and we got a few kites that had been injured from electricity wires or other sources. One large bird I remember that had been brought in with its wing almost torn off. The wing had to be amputated but the bird survived the surgery and soon recovering its appetite, it thrived and grew much fat. I could not but help wondering that, even assuming that its wing had healed, whether its new-found rotundity would have allowed it to fly at all.

Pariah Kites are becoming increasingly rare in the city these days, a matter in which I am somewhat at a loss for explanations. There is no denying that the conditions that they prefer have not completely abated. Indeed, with the increase in the population in the cities, some of their sources of food have actually increased. But the population of kites has reduced and it is seldom now that I see them in the dozens that I once used to. There is some material here for an enterprising young researcher to try and fathom the puzzle out. And if there is any such a one out there, I would be happy to share ideas and offer such assistance as lies within my powers to bestow.

So, even though the Pariah Kites are becoming increasingly more difficult to see, keep an eye open for them and, when you see them, think of me because I am finding it more and more difficult to see them. Take a sighting for me and keep watching the Pariah Kites. Until next month Happy Birding...!

CLIPPINGS

BirdLife International report on the return of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.
28 April 2005

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker Found in Arkansas

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*, one of the largest and most spectacular of the world's woodpeckers, has been rediscovered in North America. Both sexes are striking black-and-white birds, and males have flaming red crests. The news, the subject of an announcement by the journal Science, has stunned ornithologists world-wide, as the species was widely assumed to have gone extinct in North America since the last confirmed sighting in 1944.



A series of sightings between February 2004 and April 2005, in the Big Woods forest of the Mississippi River basin, involved at least one bird, a male. One observer secured brief video footage which, despite technical imperfections, yielded at least five diagnostic features of Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

More may be present, since potential habitat for a thinly distributed source population is vast at over 220,000 hectares. The Big Woods is regenerating after systematic logging which contributed to the woodpecker's disappearance. If breeding pairs do exist, most of the conditions believed to be required for successful breeding and population growth are becoming more available to them.

The species was once uncommon but widespread across lowland primary forest of the southeastern United States. No living Ivory-billed Woodpecker had been conclusively documented in continental North America since an unpaired female was seen in cut-over forest remnants in 1944.

"This extraordinary rediscovery provides hope for the 18 species classified as Potentially Extinct, such as Jamaican Petrel, Javan Lapwing and Pink-headed Duck."

Dr Michael Rands, Director and Chief Executive of BirdLife International

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is one of six North American bird species known or suspected to have gone extinct since 1880. The others are Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*), Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) and Bachman's Warbler (*Vermivora bachmanii*).

Dr Rands said, "These are judged likely to be extinct, but confirmation is required and some hope for their survival remains. Listing as Extinct has significant conservation implications, because conservation funding is, justifiably, not targeted at species believed to be extinct. Conservationists are therefore reluctant to designate species as Extinct if there is any reasonable possibility that they may still be extant, in order to avoid the 'Romeo error', where we might give up on a species before it is too late."

The New Indian Express, Hyderabad
8th February 2005

Birds' Brains – As Smart as the Chimps

Birdbrain has long been a colloquial term of ridicule. The common notion is that birds' brains are simple, or so scientists thought and taught for many years. But that notion has increasingly been called into question as crows and parrots, among other birds, have shown what appears to be behaviour as intelligent as that of chimpanzees.

The clash of simple brain and complex behaviour has led to some neuroscientists to create a new map of the avian brain. In the journal, Nature Neuroscience Reviews, an international group of avian experts is issuing what amounts to a manifesto. Nearly everything written in anatomy textbooks about the brains of birds is wrong, they say. The avian brain is as complex, flexible and inventive as any mammalian brain, they argue, and it is time to adopt a more accurate nomenclature that reflects a new understanding of the anatomies of bird and mammal brains. "Names have a powerful influence on the experiments we do and the way we think," said Erich D. Jarvis, a neuroscientist at Duke University and a leader of the Avian Brain Nomenclature Consortium.

The consortium of 29 scientists from six countries met for seven years to develop new, more accurate names for structures in both avian and mammalian brains. For example, the bird's seat of intelligence or its higher brain is now termed the pallium. "The correction of terms is a great advance," said Jon Kaas, a leading expert in neuroanatomy at Vanderbilt University in Nashville who did not participate in the consortium. "It's hard to get scientists to agree about anything."

Scientists have come to agree that birds are indeed smart, but those who study avian intelligence differ on how birds got that way. Experts, including those in the consortium, are split into two warring camps. One holds that birds' brains make the same kinds of internal connections as do mammalian brains and that intelligence in both groups arises from these connections. The other holds that bird intelligence evolved through expanding an old part of the mammal brain and using it in new ways, and it questions how developed that intelligence is.

"There are still puzzles to be solved," said Peter Marler, a leading authority on bird behaviour at the University of California, Davis, who is not part of the consortium. But the realisation that one can study mammal brains by using bird brains, he said "is a revolution."

"I think that birds are going to replace the white rat as the favoured subject for studying functional neuroanatomy," he added. (*Editor's Note: Does this spell considerable trouble for birds in the future as laboratory specimens?*) The reanalysis of avian brains gives new credibility to many

behaviours that seem odd coming from presumably dumb birds. Crows not only make hooks and spears of small sticks to carry on foraging expeditions, some have learned to put walnuts on roads for cars to crack. African grey parrots not only talk, they have a sense of humour and make up new words. Baby songbirds babble like human infants.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Small Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*)

The Small Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*) is one of the commonest of our migrant woodland birds and is often met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. Usually met with in parties of from two to more than thirty, you will often see them hawking insects in the late afternoons and early mornings. Seeing them perched on trees is far more difficult because their green plumage blends with the trees perfectly and, often enough, you may be looking directly at the bird but will be unable to see it until an incautious flutter or a swoop after a passing insect gives them away.

These birds are a lot more active in the evenings, particularly on cool evenings; in this matter they appear to be distinctly more crepuscular in their habits than other species. When the termites emerge after a sudden shower of summer rain, the Bee-eaters eagerly await the emergence of the winged termites that generally emerge with the rain. Then the news spreads and lots of Bee-eater families quickly arrive to take part in the buffet. That is when the birds are really seen in their element because the sight of a swift green arrow rocketing after midges and termites is a sight that is seldom forgotten, once seen. In flight however, the name Green appears a bit of a misnomer because the birds display a considerable amount of chestnut on the wings and, in flight, appear almost rust coloured rather than green. Sitting posture however, reveals the accuracy of the name.

The Small Green Bee-eater is found throughout the Indian subcontinent, though they are noticeably less common in the arid areas of the Sindh desert. Otherwise, they do quite well throughout their range so long as they can find areas that provide sufficient insects for their diet. They are hole-nesting birds and dig their tunnel nests in the banks of streams and rivers where the sand is soft and can be dug into with ease. Loss of habitat has resulted in the decline of the species throughout their range. Although they are still quite extensively found throughout the region, there are signs that they are not as numerous as they used to be. The birds need protection and that can only be got through the change in attitudes of people.



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Hyderabad, 26 February 2004

Sd. Aasheesh Pittie (Signature of Publisher)

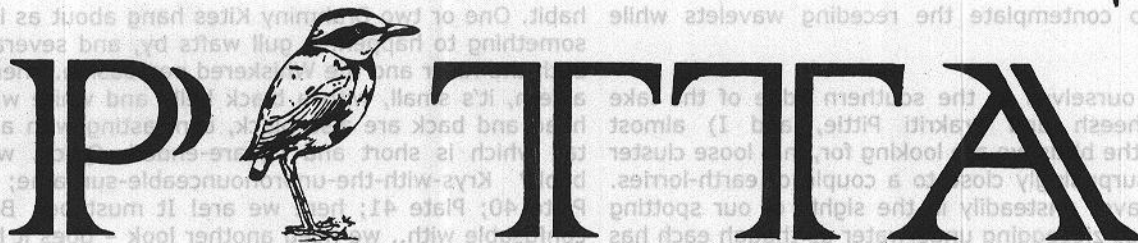
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Field Outing

Thursday, 16-vi-2005: Chilkur Deer Park, Hyderabad

menipatnam: Langar House: A P Police Academy. Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Chilkur is rich in small woodland birds – there should be warblers and some flycatchers around as well. Members of the pheasant family also are particularly well-represented. Keep an ear open for the calls of the Painted Partridge. Peafowl, Grey Partridge and Quail also are often seen. For those who love those LBJ's it's absolute paradise! The youngsters will have lots of Chital to look at – maybe the odd Sambar will also appear. Look for the Oriole nest near the EEC. There should also be a Spotted Munia nest in the vicinity. Carry plenty of water and snacks.

Sunday, 26-vi-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak

Meet near the small temple at the side of the road by the milestone. Sightings include many interesting species like the Pygmy and Mahratta Woodpeckers, both species of Chloropsis, and possibly Spangled Drongo as well. Woodland birds are a certainty, possibly also Indian Pitta, Ground Thrush and Paradise Flycatcher. On the lake, there will be River Terns and maybe Cotton Teals and Openbilled Storks. Look out for the larger owls, both Great Horned and Brown Fish Owl. Crested Serpent Eagle and maybe a Crested Hawk-Eagle also may well be seen if really lucky. This will be a full day trip; carry packed lunches and plenty of water.

For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 20-vi-2005, 6 p.m.:

Vidyananya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the press

NEWS & NOTES

Flamingos (and more) at Osman Sagar

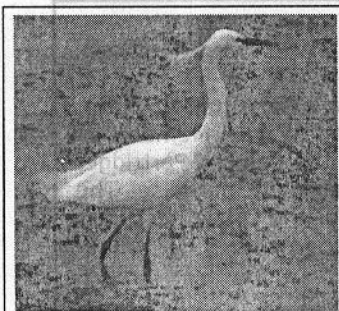
By Suhel Quader

Alerted by a short article in The Hindu newspaper the previous day, a small group of us sets out for Osman Sagar (on the western outskirts of Hyderabad) early on 9 May hoping to see Greater Flamingos. There is scarcely any water in the lake; the far shore is depressingly close to the bund, and rocks and old structures stand out of the water, bone dry. Fifteen or twenty fishermen paddle about in the

knee-deep water. On the northern and southern shores, small knots of lorries cluster around shallow excavations in the dry lake bed. Bare-torsoed men dig up clods of red earth and load them into the trucks, bound, no doubt, for a construction site in the city. In the distance, a single man makes his way purposefully to the lake's edge, there to commune with nature

and, perhaps, to contemplate the receding wavelets while doing so.

Having installed ourselves at the southern edge of the lake bund, we (Aasheesh and Prakriti Pittie, and I) almost immediately see the birds we are looking for, in a loose cluster in the shallows surprisingly close to a couple of earth-lorries. The flamingos waver unsteadily in the sights of our spotting scopes, their heads zigzagging underwater as though each has lost a valuable coin and is frantically feeling for it. A quick count reveals about 50 birds (49, 52, and 52 are the numbers from the three observers) in that flock. Scanning elsewhere, we find a few more flamingos – some singles, two groups of three – bringing the total to about 60. Some of these latter are small enough and pink enough to look suspiciously like Lesser Flamingos, but distance defeats a definitive ID.



A Little Egret showing off its aigrettes at Osman Sagar

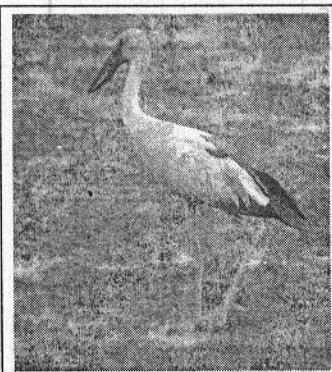
An almost-dry lake sounds like a depressing place, but not so Osman Sagar today. The lake and its edges are full of birds. Egrets of all descriptions (well, all right: **three** species) dot the lakeshore, keeping a dainty distance from the sombre-looking Grey Herons. Openbill Storks straggle all along the shoreline, some probing with their strange beaks into the not-yet-baked-hard mud about 30 metres

from the water's edge. A few Painted Storks manage to look decorative perched high upon a tall pile of boulders with whitewashed tops. Little bands of Blackwinged Stilts in non-breeding plumage pick their careful way along the water's edge, and the melancholy "tiu-tiu" call of the odd Greenshank wafts its way across to us. Far across the lake, a huge flock of about a thousand cormorants stands on a spit of land, silent and orderly, like nuns awaiting smoke signals heralding the new pope.

The water itself contains the expected waterfowl in the low hundreds: Spot-billed Ducks, Lesser Whistling Teal, and Cotton

Pygmy-geese (Cotton Teal to you and me). But also some surprises: a lone Brahminy Duck, and four or five Shovelers in a flock; silent rebels against migration's call. Several godwits have also decided to stay back for the summer, and these probe desultorily in the shallows.

Yet more birds in the air above the lake. A handful of Pariah Kites wheel around as is their



A pensive Openbill

habit. One or two Brahminy Kites hang about as if waiting for something to happen. A gull wafts by, and several terns – of both the River and the Whiskered persuasion. Then, wait – it's a tern, it's small, with a black belly and white wings, but its head and back are also black, contrasting with a snow-white tail which is short and square-ended. Quick, where is the book? Krys-with-the-unpronounceable-surname; Plate 39; Plate 40; Plate 41; here we are! It must be.. But wait! It's confusable with.. we need another look – does it have a black armpit? This is critical. Here it comes again and this time we're ready – two with binoculars, one on the scope. Yes! It's official – a new bird for the region: a White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*, if you're finicky about these things) in full breeding plumage. The tern seems to be working a regular circuit: it passes by our section of the lake once every 15 minutes or so, and we get good views every time. Well done

and – congratulations – all around! I think we should all go on impulsive birding trips more often, don't you?

Postscript:

The following Sunday (the 15th) a group of about 40 birders and friends gather at Osman Sagar. An attempt to broaden the audience by inviting the public to come and appreciate the flamingos



Pariah Kite "wheeling": this is a specialised kind of flight defined by its apparent aimlessness

has failed because none of the newspapers that promised to carry the story actually did so. Still, we are rewarded with an excellent morning's birding. The flamingos are there, as are a few other should-be-gone-north ducks: a Garganey here, a couple of handsome Pintails there. And also another surprise: a lone Spot-billed Pelican! This fine individual (a juvenile, judging from its brown plumage) starts the morning on the far side of the lake, standing on the bank next to the water, and preening. When we look again half an hour later, it has moved much closer – right across from us, and very clear through each of the three spotting scopes we have set up. Here, it perches sedately on a rock, flanked on either side by a Painted Stork, the whole scene looking carefully arranged for our benefit.

And of course there is much other birding besides the spectacle of unusual species. Purple Herons and Purple Moorhens stalk the bare banks of the lake, looking quite out of place away from their usual marshy habitat. Swallows and Martins, Swifts and Pratincoles, the list goes on. But finally, as the sun climbs relentlessly in the sky, the fishermen start to trickle away with the day's catch. The air starts shimmering in the heat and it's time for us to effect a prudent retreat.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

When the mango fruit hangs heavy on the branches of the mango trees, there is one bird that is generally always seen in the gardens – a flash of gold and yellow, with a touch of black. This is the immediate impression of the discerning person when he first sets eyes on the Golden Oriole – though some people prefer to call him the mango bird. A very apt title; as the birds generally appear with the ripe mangoes, and if possessed of a little imagination, it is not difficult to mistake one of these birds for a mango, either.

Golden Orioles are not frequently encountered in the city and, as such, it is perhaps a bit presumptuous of me to label them as urban birds. However, they are seen often enough in fruit orchards and, if you happen to have a mango tree in the vicinity, then you will know all about it as they are generally always to be seen hopping around in the branches. Therefore, we will give them the status of urban birds this once – if for no other reason than that I have just yesterday seen one arrive on the food tray in the balcony. It was a male bird too and he managed to dazzle me with his gold and black plumage to such an extent that I immediately took pen and paper and started to tell about him and his ilk.

A Golden Oriole is a most handsome bird. The male, with his striking gold and yellow plumage relieved by the black wings, and the female, a duller more greenish version of her mate, are distinctly pleasing to the eyes. What is not so nice about them is their sound-box. It is true that one seldom has double-strings to his bows and what is pleasing to the eyes need not necessarily be pleasing to the ears, but surely that harsh croaking sound is most unfortunate, especially proceeding from the throat of a bird otherwise so uniformly splendid. Still, the hen bird seems to think much of her spouse's song and she happily joins in and the pair perform much duets together. Then they set about the onerous duties of building a neat little nest in the crotch of some scrubby tree, or suspended from the tip of a thin bough of some leafy forest monarch and, so protected from harm, they lay their eggs, hatch them out and produce very endearing little miniatures of themselves. A male Golden Oriole, with his olive branches in tow is a most comical sight. There he goes, hopping from branch to branch; and there too go the stubby-tailed little orioles, hopping just like father, occasionally tripping over their feet and having to flap their little wings hard to regain balance – the while teetering between falling and standing...

It may sometimes happen that the novice will mistake a male Common Iora with one of these birds – it is with a sense of some shame that I confess I was myself once guilty of this misidentification. I plead excuse however in the fact that I was very young then (both in age and in identification skills); though I often get chafed for this *faux pas*, and I have never really managed to live it down yet.

I have seen these birds nesting in the heart of the city, and far away from it. I recollect a nest sighting in Sanjivayya Park, which is right in the heart of the city. True that the nest was

overshadowed and passed over in the light of the discovery of a Pied Myna nest on the same tree – but it was there; and the hen was incubating as well. I noted that she never strayed far from the nest. Occasionally the male came and relieved her, but her idea of relief was a quick aerial sortie, a hasty bite at a caterpillar or a moth, and then back home to her brood. A model housewife, I thought her to be...

The other nest I saw was in Chilkur. Suspended on the end of a thin bough of a tree near the EEC, I was first attracted to the nest by the sight of the cock bird flying in and relieving his mate of her duties. Here too, the hen was a most conscientious mother – she made one brief swoop through the trees and was back at her post. The cock rubbed beaks with her and then flew off while she settled herself back on her eggs with, doubtless, a sigh of relief.

In Madras, at the Crocodile Bank near Mahabalipuram, there was an instance when the loud shrieking of Orioles brought me out in a hurry. A green Vine Snake was making its way towards the nest of these birds. The beady eyes of the snake were fixed intently on its target and it had eyes and ears for nothing else – not that it has ears in the first place anyway. However, so intent was the snake on the nest that it completely failed to take the adult birds into account and that was its undoing. The hen landed on the snake's back and pecked away vigorously; so startling the snake that he promptly lost his balance and fell to earth, he knew not where... Directly below the oriole nest was a large crocodile enclosure, and the snake fell straight into the pond. Fortunately for it, there was only one crocodile in that particular enclosure and that one was lying out basking in the sun. This enabled the Vine Snake to make a quick getaway and I don't think it went anywhere near that particular nest again. This told me that the Orioles can be exceedingly bold birds when they have to be. A bird that can attack a snake that is partial to birds as a large part of its diet is no ordinary bird. It argues a stout heart and a boldness of nature that it would be hard to overpraise.

The chap that visited the balcony had some interesting things to do. To start with, he decided that the bits of fruit lying in the buffet tray were not to his taste. So he gave those up and then proceeded to give a very passable imitation of a mouse as he nosed around in the corners of the walls, looking for midges or moths – though how he proposed to find them on the walls, he did not divulge to me. In his nosing, he came upon the potted shrub and discovered a caterpillar thereon, which he philosophically picked up, banged around a bit and then swallowed. A poor offering for so splendid a bird, but he was used to these things and took them in his stride. Having made quite certain that there were no more caterpillars around, he then nosed around a bit more, peered up at me with vague interest as I sat there beaming down at him, thought a bit about exploring under my chair, decided against it and then helped himself to a drink of water and flew off to the mango tree from whence he had originally come. No other

bird that has ever landed on my balcony has made me feel so completely humble and ashamed that I had not proper food to offer them. Maybe I should take a leaf out of the Oriole's book and make some arrangement to keep a supply of moths or caterpillars available at the food tray!

I don't think that many people will know that the cousin of these birds, the Blackheaded Oriole is also sometimes seen. However, be it mentioned that this other chap is mostly a

forest species and will not condescend to visit the garden or the balcony food tray. It believes, not without reason, that the best way to avoid getting endangered is to stay away from danger. Very sensible of him, I must admit; though it pains me that I have never really managed to get a good eyeful of this chap. But then, hope springs eternal...

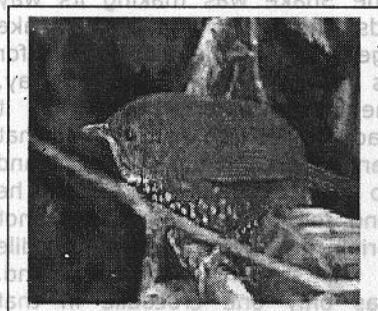
So this month, eat plenty of mangoes, and keep watching the Golden Oriole. Until next month, Happy Birding...!!

CLIPPINGS

Wren-babbler found after 50 years

18-05-2005

On 18 November 2004 Ben King and Julian P. Donahue rediscovered the Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* in India's Arunachal Pradesh region. The species had not previously been seen for more than fifty years.



The wren-babbler was re-found at an elevation of 6,000 feet (1,800 m) on the Roing-Hunli road, in the Dibang River drainage of the Mishmi Hills, eastern Himalaya. The bird initially responded to a tape-recording of its nearest relative, the Rufous-throated Wren-

Babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus* - its responses were recorded and played back, with excellent results.

Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* was described by Ripley in 1948, based upon a unique female specimen mist-netted by the Ripley party on 5 January 1947 at an elevation of 5,100 feet (1,545 m) at Dreyi, on the Lohit River drainage of the Mishmi Hills. There had been no additional records or field observations of the species for almost 58 years until now.

"We had little difficulty locating the furtive, active bird, from its vocalisations and the movement of the dense roadside undergrowth, but it took an hour of effort to observe enough 'pieces' of the bird to conclusively identify it." —Julian P. Donahue

The team subsequently learned that the species is easily located (but excruciatingly difficult to observe) on the roadside between Roing and Hunli, on both the north and south sides of Mayodia Pass (elev. 2,655 m), in broadleaf evergreen forest at elevations of 5,100–7,700 feet (1,545–2,330 m); one day they elicited responses from seven different birds along just one kilometer of road.

The species is currently classified by BirdLife as Vulnerable.

By **Julian P. Donahue**

Mysterious birds of Assam keep plunging to death.

Jatinga, India [AFP] -- A bizarre phenomenon of flocks of birds committing "suicide" in this remote village in India's northeastern state of Assam has foxed experts and the strange behaviour remains a mystery.

From August to October, when the night is moonless and foggy, accompanied by wind and drizzle, Jatinga, a village on a ridge in the North Cachar Hills district, 334 km south of Assam's capital Guwahati, turns into an island of searchlights and lanterns. Armed with catapults and bamboo poles, groups of villagers assemble outside their homes almost every night with torch flames and lanterns hung overhead, waiting for the "dying birds." And in no time, the slopes and hills of Jatinga buzz with the twitter of species of birds in agony, plummeting to the ground like ghosts from nowhere.

For almost three hours until midnight, the tiny hamlet becomes a nightmare for a bevy of birds that come dashing to the light source to be captured and killed by villagers. Curiously, most of the birds do not attempt to fly away from the lights. They look dazed and dishevelled, almost traumatised by the experience. The villagers get going in no time, bringing down birds hovering around the light sources by a vigorous swing of the bamboo poles. They use catapults to shoot those in flight or those perching on trees and bushes nearby.

"In the past, the haul of one night sometimes reached 500 to 600 birds with around 200 as the maximum by one person," Heren Langthasa, a tribal villager said. "But now a single person in one night manage to catch 50 to 60 birds," Langthasa told AFP.

Legend has it that the Zemi Naga tribal villagers at Jatinga were the first to witness the phenomenon in the late 19th century when disoriented birds in their thousands flocked to a bonfire lit by the locals in a paddy field to scare away wild pigs. The experience frightened them, as they believed the birds were evil spirits

swooping down from the sky. Eventually the Zemi Naga tribe deserted Jatinga.

The Jaintias, another tribe which moved to Jatinga in 1905, stumbled on the phenomenon while going into the hills at night with flaming torches to round up cattle. The bamboo torches attracted showers of birds, which the Jaintias regarded as a "god-sent gift."

Experts say that up to 50 species of birds get killed, including the Tiger Bittern, Black Bittern, Little Egret, Pond Heron, Indian Pitta and Kingfishers. The experts however say the birds do not commit suicide but are killed by villagers under circumstances not yet fully explained.

"The birds get caught in the fog, get disoriented at their roost by the very high velocity of wind. It is highly probable that the birds come towards the light sources set up by the villagers for refuge and in the process get killed or captured," said Anwaruddin Choudhury, author of "The Birds of Assam." "However, the entire phenomenon still continues to be a mystery, but it is a fallacy that birds commit suicide in Jatinga," he told AFP.

Local people are beginning to become aware of the need to conserve the bird population, experts say.

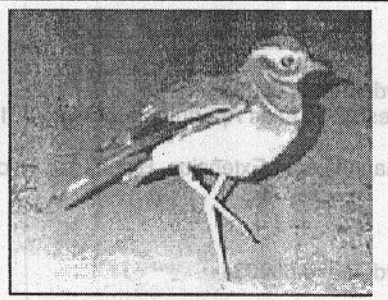
"We must create awareness about the danger of the entire bird species getting wiped out if the villagers continue enticing birds with torch flames and then eating the flesh," said H.C. Khersa, a teacher at Jatinga.

Most of the 2,000 villagers at Jatinga are farmers growing citrus fruits, mainly oranges.

'Voice box' to track Indian bird

The technology that gives cuddly toys their life-like sounds is being used to locate one of the world's rarest birds.

The Jerdon's courser lives in a tiny area of Andhra Pradesh in India and is seen so infrequently that hardly anything is known about its behaviour.



But now the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has had noise boxes made up that mimic the animal's call.

Hundreds of park rangers will be given a box and a photograph and asked to report any sightings to ornithologists.

At night

A recording of the Jerdon's courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) - the only one in existence - was made by Simon Wooton during a five-week field trip in one of the remotest parts of India.

"We had to see the bird and hear it at the same time to make sure we had the right call," he told BBC News Online.

"We saw it for about a second. Luckily, it called in flight, so we knew it was the right call." Wooton's group tried to track the bird, but lost it almost as quickly as they found it.

The courser was first identified by Dr Jerdon, a surgeon who travelled and wrote extensively about Indian wildlife in the middle of the 19th Century.

There have only ever been a handful of sightings. Indeed, so little is known about the bird that it was thought to be extinct for 80 years.

Then, one of the many teams that went to Andhra Pradesh to look for it discovered the animal was nocturnal.

Kew idea

Dr Rhys Green, an RSPB zoologist, was trying to find a novel way to increase awareness about the courser in India when an idea came to him while wandering around a gift shop in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London.

He came across a cuddly toy which makes a lifelike bird sound. "If we could take the box that makes the sound out and reprogramme it with the sound of the courser, we could use it as an educational tool," he said.

He asked the manufacturers if they could re-work the "voice box" to incorporate the Jerdon's call, and now the little devices, packaged up with a photo of the bird, are on their way to Andhra Pradesh.

It is hoped the boxes will help conservationists track the courser, thus discovering more about one of the world's most elusive birds.

By Sarah Mukherjee

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*)

The **Pied Crested Cuckoo** (*Clamator jacobinus*) is a common woodland migrant bird and is generally met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. Though they are more at home in wooded areas, they do tend to stray into large gardens where there are shady trees. Their distinctive call is more noticeable than the birds themselves.

The Pied Crested Cuckoo is often associated with the coming of the rains. There is the certainty that a sighting of this bird generally means that the rains are imminent, if they have not arrived already. Members of the BSAP are aware that, within 21 days of the first sighting of this bird, the monsoon will break. Whether the vagaries of the weather these days still allow the bird to function as so reliable a pointer remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that it is still a fair indicator of the coming of the monsoons. This function makes the sighting of this bird always very pleasant.

With their distinctive black-and-white plumage, which gives the birds their common name, the bird is quite unmistakable as far as their identification is concerned. The perky crest and the pied plumage gives away this pigeon-sized (though slimmer) bird. In the monsoons, the bird is quite spread out as far as its range is concerned. They spread throughout the Indian sub-continent and are met with in the hills of the ghats as well as in the plains. They are known to be brood parasitic on the Babbler family and are generally found in numbers in those areas where the Babblers are known to nest. There are also records of their offspring having been found in the nests of Wren-warblers; though how they are able to fit into these tiny nests is a wonder.

The birds seen in Southern India are thought to be members of the Southern African race (where the species is known as the Jacobin Cuckoo). Loss of habitat is causing some problems in the populations of these birds. There are fewer being noted now than were seen in earlier years. What the exact problem is, is not yet clear. These birds are sometimes seen in the cages of the bird markets, so it is certain that there is a small trade in them. How much this is causing the population decline needs to be studied.



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I, Aasheesh Pittie, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Hyderabad, 26 February 2004

Sd. Aasheesh Pittie (Signature of Publisher)

For Private Circulation Only

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PITTA



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2005

Bulletin of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh

New Series. Volume 2 Number 7. July 2005

RNI: Title Verification Letter No.: APENGO2542/01/1/2003-TC.

Declaration Form B No.: K2428/PRESS.SB/103/2003.

Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

Field Outings

Sunday, 10-vii-2005: Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad

Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Sightings of scrubland birds are assured. There should be some resident waterbirds on the lake also. All three Kingfisher species and maybe Small Greenbilled Malkoha as well. If really lucky, then the nesting pair of Grey Hornbills near the Tortoise enclosures. Plenty of Warblers and scrubland birds, lots of Peafowl and other members of the pheasant family such as Partridge (both Grey and Painted) and Quail. Stone Curlews nest in the Lion Safari Park and, in the Bear Safari, it may be possible to see the Common Indian Nightjar. Indian Moorhens could well be raising their family on the pond near the raptor enclosures. They also have a very cunningly concealed nest on that very pond; see if you can spot it. Carry water and snacks.

Sunday, 24-vii-2005: University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad

Meet at the main gate of the Campus by 7.15. Sightings will include woodland bird species and perhaps some resident ducks on the lakes. This campus has not yet been fully explored and there could well be some surprises in store. Keep an eye open for the suspected Little Spiderhunter near the library block. Earlier there used to be several Vultures around and the odd Neophron may still be sighted. For the most part, there will be a plethora of Prinias and other small warblers and bulbuls around. The University campus is also very rich in Butterflies and the Danaid Egfly has been sighted here. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 18-vii-2005: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Talk by Mrs. Gool R. Plumber on a trip to Nagarhole Wildlife Sanctuary

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

NEWS & NOTES

We are led to believe that most of the members of the society are coming around to the opinion that "No News is Good News". This is the only suggestion I can come up with that covers the fact that there has been no record of Society Outings for the past 6 to 8 months of PITTA. It makes the newsletter very poor reading if there is no news, per se. There must be at least one person who does turn up for the outings of the Society. Surely it does not take much to do a write-up (however rough) and send it to the Society email address given at the end. The editing work can be undertaken, but the editors cannot invent the happenings of the Society. This is the prerogative of the members who attend the trips. They are the front line of the Society and, as such, they have to contribute about the happenings of the day. It could happen that there is some sighting, or some behavioural aspect of a particular bird that was noted and which has not been hitherto observed. Such things become very important later on. A case in point is the recent happenings of the Flamingos turning up at Osman Sagar and, when the members went out to the site, interesting sightings

such as the Brahminy Duck, Pintail and Shovellers were made; far out of the normal time that these birds are generally seen. I was reminded of the sighting made of a Brahminy Duck at KBR National Park during the BSAP Habitat Survey Project, in May 1999. Is there some relationship here? Could it be that some of the migratory waterfowl stay back after the others leave? Or are these perhaps injured or sick birds that are unable to fly with the rest, and so stay back until they are healed? If they do get healed, do they then take wing and return to their normal haunts? Such questions are interesting, and can be only answered if members WRITE their experiences. I would earnestly request the members to send in their experiences, no matter how small or trivial they may seem. Writing style can be corrected if required – that is what the editors are there for. The matter is what makes the

reading interesting, and which is something that is outside the scope of the editor's sights. Is there someone out there who would give this some thought and make a private pledge to do the write-up of the society trips and send it to the editors for inclusion in our newsletter.

The other point I would like to stress here is that of the mailing list. As all are aware, there is a BSAP mailing list in existence, which has been rather neglected of late and, as a result, information is not being sent out as regularly as it should be. It would be a great help if the members (at least those resident in A.P.) can subscribe to the mailing list. It will help the activities of the Society tremendously. Please email priyankpor@yahoo.com.

(Editors)

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

Hitherto, we have been concentrating our faculties on the birds that are mostly seen during the daytime hours. There is yet another contingent, that are creatures of the night and which come into action when the rest of the avian crowd, and a considerable number of humans too, have gone to bed. These are the birds of the night and, of these, there are very few that are at home in the city. The odd nightjar may be seen, or heard, in suburban areas and, if you happen to have a home next to some towering outcrop of rock, you may hear a passing Great Horned Owl. In small villages in European climes, the nearest church tower is generally home to a Tawny Owl or a Barn Owl or two. Having said that, there is one bird, of this clan, that the city can fairly claim and that is the Spotted Owlet; that endearing little comedian that is often seen bobbing around on leafy trees in the heart of urban gardens. And if you don't see it, you will doubtless have heard it at some time or the other – a series of wild gibbering screeches, squawks and chattering that I defy anyone to reproduce on paper.

Speaking of the language of these little people, there is an interesting little tale surrounding the Spotted Owlet sound box. Apparently, the female of these birds is a very pronounced gossip and likes to shriek aloud the goings-on of the family in whose garden she lives. Periodically, the male, considerably scandalized and possibly also quite exasperated by this monologue, screeches at her to "shut-up... shut-up..." A very droll tale, this! My old man told it me. The birds are called "Chukwa – Chukwee" in the Hyderabad region – a name that is very localised to the region, as the same name, in the north is given to the Brahminy Duck.

If you happen to have a hollow tree in the garden, there is an excellent way to ascertain whether it is tenanted by one or more of these birds. During the noon hour, deliver a series of sharp taps on the trunk of the tree. Should it be the residence of a Spotted Owlet, almost immediately you will see a round face popping up in the opening of the tree, followed a moment later by the rest of the bird. It will fly out of the hole onto a convenient lookout perch and, from that point of vantage, it

will peer down at you with undisguised disgust at having woken it up. I know of no other bird that can give a more withering glance – the first time I was on the receiving end of this, it made me feel like a piece of cheese! apart from giving me a sense of extreme guilt.

Oddly enough, I have been lucky enough to have a pair of these birds coming down to the balcony on more than one occasion. The first time, I was feeling extremely lethargic and, instead of lying down and going to sleep, like the rest of mankind, I was lazing on the balcony with a mug of tea and my thoughts. Noticing something bobbing around in one of the top corners, I concentrated my gaze thereon and found it to be a pair of these chaps perched on the clothesline, which swung to and fro gently with the birds. They seemed to be courting. There was much necking and sundry little hops and jumps around each other, together with a few rather excited cheeps now and then. Suddenly, they became aware of the intruder prying on their most intimate moments, and decided to betake themselves elsewhere. So they launched out of the balcony and, some little while later, I heard their excited chattering break out from the large mango tree behind the apartments.

The second time was a few nights ago, again when the majority of the world was in the throes of sleep. I had spent a rather hectic day in the office and managed to return home at the rather romantic hour of 3 a.m., at which time I decided that rather than turn in, it might be profitable to brew some tea and partake of it in the cloistral surroundings of the balcony – communing with the moonlight, as it were. As it happened, I could not have hit on a more bright idea; for a few minutes after I had settled into my chair, there came the all too familiar chatterings of a family of Spotted Owlets, and there came to the balcony rail, three of these little characters. After giving me a rather quizzical look, as who should say "What are you doing up at this hour?", they gave me up as a lost case and immediately proceeded with the business of the day, which as far as I could ascertain, consisted of enjoying themselves hugely. Periodically, one or the other would take

wing and sally forth from the rail and, on return, would land heavily on the back of one of the others, whereupon that chap would take wing and repeat the performance. A few minutes of this and then they started a kind of wild dervish dance, twirling and leaping and going round and round in circles until I felt quite dizzy. A few moments later, obviously feeling that I was quite refreshed by their performance, they departed and I haven't seen them since. For the benefit of those interested, may I say that I went to bed that day much refreshed!

A few years ago, there used to be a nesting pair of these birds in the garden of a close family friend. This particular garden was a bit of an urban jungle type (thick hedgerows, large trees and generally quiet neighbourhood) – consequently it produced several surprises... The Indian Pitta was one of them! Anyway, the Spotted Owlets had appropriated a large Acacia tree in the garden and, finding that it had a hollow interior, they immediately announced their claim to the site and, shortly thereafter, they produced three little miniatures of themselves. If I had thought that the adults were droll enough, their olive branches were quite the most ridiculously endearing creatures I have ever seen. To begin with, their heads looked rather too large for their bodies and, when taken in conjunction with large quantities of snowy white down on the flanks, with a few dark feathers beginning to break through, and a stump to which were attached three quills that did duty as a tail, the sight was altogether one never to be forgotten. What is more, I never have...!

Coupled with all this charm, the birds are quite intelligent too. They realised quite early on, that being entirely nocturnal is not without a certain amount of risk. Though it undoubtedly helps in the catching of little mice and a sleeping bird or two, it has the disadvantage that it deprives a gourmet from sundry juicy grubs and roaches. So, to negate this drawback, and to ensure that grubs and roaches also figure on the menu, the owls decided to sally forth also on cloudy and dark days.

Though it is true that they do not make any marathon runs during the daytime hours, still it is not impossible to see them hunting in the late evenings and the early mornings also. This is the time when their gourmet streak comes to the fore and they demand a good fat roach or juicy grub. More often than not, they manage to get both. And in the nights, they get their share of moths, midges, small mice and the odd sleeping sparrow or warbler.

Much like owls of all species, the superstitious eye these birds askance. Nothing will convince these honest fellows that owls are no more unlucky than a black cat or walking under a ladder. The good citizen will merely look at you, register disbelief and continue to hold his firm resolve to have either nothing to do with owls or, if opportunity offers, to destroy any that he can. And though owls are not easy to outwit, the canny bird trapper is aware of this lucrative market and manages to cater to it rather too well. I have often seen the birds stuffed in little cages in the bird market, peering out of the cage with rather a dazed look, doubtless from the shock of capture and also the exposure to bright sunlight, a feature that is entirely alien in their world.

A thing I have never managed to understand about the species is the complete schizophrenia that surrounds the birds. Consider the following two sayings: "As wise as an OWL." Wonderful...! Quite right too – the owl is definitely a wise bird. But then, how do we reconcile to the saying "Stop behaving like an OWL!"; the owl here being used in the derogatory sense and implying extreme stupidity. If this is not schizophrenia, then I do not know what is... How can a bird be described as wise in one breath and dumb in the very next? Any ideas?

So this month, whether you select a wise one or one of the 'other ones', keep watching (or listening to) the Spotted Owlet. Until next month, Happy Birding...!

CLIPPINGS

Report on the Dead Crows issue in parts of Mumbai

SITES AND TOLL:

Locations	Toll
Bandra - Khar (Kherwadi, Turner Rd, Khar Danda, Hill Road, around Lilavati, Rly stns, many other sites)	158
Sion - Matunga - Dharavi (incl MNP)	07
Andheri area (incl Lokhandwala, Yari Rd, 7 - Bungalows)	49
Andheri East	27
Oshiwara (incl along Link Rd, Adarsh Ngr)	43
Goregaon (E & W combined)	16
Malad (E & W combined)	19
Kandivli (E & W combined)	12
Borivli	09
Dahisar	05
Mira - Bhayandar - Vasai - Virar	12

Santa-Cruz	07
Aarey	03
Mahim	03
Vidya Vihar	10
Guru Teg Bahadur/Chunabhatti	09
Wadala	17
King Circle (just reported)	02
Tardeo	01
Race Course	04
Warden Rd/Malabar Hill	02
Dhobi Talao area (though c. 12 reported, however 6 were found)	06
Powai	01
Khopoli	02
Panvel	05

PROBLEMS INVOLVED WITH LOOKING FOR DEAD CROWS:

Some of you might be wondering "How come I didn't notice any dead crow in my area?"

Actually, a majority of us are least likely to look out for dead crows, of all things, whilst traveling by road (driving, or travelling by public transport). I learnt this the slightly hard and not inexpensive way as I smashed the front left headlight and bumper of my car on some stones and debris that had been piled up as I was driving and simultaneously keeping a tract of dead crows. Especially in the Oshiwara area, the spate of blackish plastic bags discarded and fluttering by the roadside warranted a careful look.

Most dead crows can be found whilst walking, either on main roads or side-roads. More often than not, I noticed that crows, being held in some esteem generally, are put by the side of the road or into the drain or some garbage bin, though quite a few (actually more than half) had been flattened by passing vehicles, these evidently having dropped dead on busy roads/intersections.

I had been continuously looking for very freshly dead specimens but very few were found. Though three attempts were made to reach such specimens to the NIV Pune, however only one could be delivered and that too in a rather



decomposed state (heat, journey time and reaching after off hours). Instead, it was decided to send specimens to the Veterinary Hospital in Mumbai and the pathology dept was a great help.

POST MORTEM findings on the specimens:

Collapsed lungs, hemorrhagic lesions in trachea, sinuses filled with hemorrhagic matter. Hemorrhagic lesions in muscles of thigh and sternum; bones poorly calcified. Congested liver, with streaks of hemorrhages; brain, intestines too hemorrhagic;

DIAGNOSIS: The lesions suggestive of immunocompetence, and it is suggested may be seen in viral diseases like infectious bursal disease and may be complicated with aflatoxins. But more detailed virological tests needed.

SOME PECULIAR OBSERVATIONS: Drooping head symptom was noticed/reported 20 times, incl by one observer from South Mumbai.

On two occasions someone reported a crow dying in front of their eyes and one observer reported sudden death of his 'pet' crow, just dropping dead for no apparent reason.

NOW, IS IT SOME VIRUS OR NOT?

Veterinary experts believe it is a viral infection, no doubts about that. But this would require detail virological examination, as the NIV Pune, and I am at my wit's end with the professional limitations currently to reaching a site of freshly dead specimen always; a lot more support here would have been welcome but I guess a lot of us are extremely busy

in Mumbai to really run for dead crows or to take the issue more seriously enough.

In any population, the virus may not necessarily strike each and every individual of any species. You can judge it from our own response. If there is a viral infection in an area, it is not that every person gets it. May be the healthier individuals do not contract the disease. May be some strains are spread due to contact in various forms. The same could be true with the crows.

IS IT SOME POISON?

Good opinion and not entirely ruled out, considering the crow as a species is omnivorous and often largely a scavenger and hence more prone to this possibility. However I checked and found no new brand of rat poison or any such being introduced the past 3 months. It was also opined that perhaps the composition of some existing rat or insect poison might have been recently altered. I am in no position to comment on this and this would require a thorough examination by experts.

The last suggestion by Ravi Vaidyanathan, the connection between Mangoes - Calcium Carbide seems, another interesting probability but the odds seem against this. There are mango seasons every year and never before has anyone observed anything quite like this. Of course, unless there has been an unusually greater usage of the particular chemical/any other agent this time around. Anything more on this would be welcome?

IS IT THE WEST NILE VIRUS?

Absolutely no idea or any manner of confirmation of this. BUT I THINK THIS NEEDS TO BE LOOKED AT VERY SERIOUSLY. There is an internet warning for the Indian region with respect to this virus and some people I've spoken to believe we need to be alert.

The report that Manoj Karkhanis had uplinked to the mumbainaturalists site and which I pasted on the BOB group also reflects upon four very critical issues pertaining to the unusually high number of crows dying in New York City and why crows, more than any other bird species, seems to be dying in numbers, and the relation with the above virus. That's a very thought provoking, even worrying piece. Equally distressing is the fact that some other observers, including from these egroups, have noticed overseas, and has been documented, all with respect to the crows.

IS IT ANY WAY related to the Avian Flu that has terrorized parts of SE Asia? No -according to the several pathologists and other experts who believe this is a different strain of virus and does not mean any danger to humans.

Whatever may be the final result, and we still are not in the green, the fact is that the crow, dead or alive, means business. Too many alive are symptomatic of a change much needed in our lifestyle. Too many dead could mean serious problems, for the crows, for us and for a lot else of nature, beside.

Though anything more on this will be shared on these platforms, I nonetheless wish to thank all those who helped with the running around (especially Sunil and Anil), and those who responded and all those who endured with this trail of death.

Many thanks also to the several veterinarians who willingly helped and to the Times of India and all other publications for the appeals that helped us get some more data than would have been otherwise possible. Let's only pray that this ends here, as a passing but clear forewarning to us to never ignore nature's signals, howsoever trivial they may seem or howsoever abundant a species might be. Most certainly we must shed our thinking that just because there are too many of certain birds or animals, a few dying is not cause for any suspicion or is not a blip on the radar.

World's Largest Caspian Tern Colony to be Decimated

Plans to devastate the world's largest colony of Caspian Terns look set to go ahead under a final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), completed by FWS and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The plan calls for the elimination of up to 74% of the tern colony on East Sand Island in the Columbia River on the Washington-Oregon border.



All but 1-1.5 acres of the 6 acres of sandy habitat on the island would be destroyed and birds relocated, reducing tern numbers over several years from 9,500 current breeding pairs to as few as 2,500 pairs. The colony currently

holds 70% of the Pacific Coast population, due mostly to the loss of suitable alternate nesting habitat (such as the deliberate destruction of habitat at neighboring Rice Island by federal agencies).

While Pacific salmon in Alaska remain in plentiful supply, salmon numbers in the Columbia River have declined precipitously in recent years. NMFS has long blamed the terns for inhibiting salmon recovery by their consumption of juvenile salmonids – a conclusion disputed by scientists. The EIS was completed in settlement of a lawsuit, filed by ABC, Defenders of Wildlife, National Audubon Society, and Seattle Audubon Society. The groups contend that the terns have only a minute impact on salmon returns and are being unfairly scapegoated, while the real causes of salmon declines – dams, habitat loss, over-harvest, and fish hatcheries – go largely uncontested.

The plan, estimated to cost \$2.4 million in its first year, calls for new tern habitat to be established elsewhere in Washington, Oregon, and California. However, some of these sites are up to 800 miles from the present colony, and all would expose terns to greater threats from predators and environmental toxins, as well as increased competition from other birds. Until suitable, predator-free habitat is established elsewhere, and terns have colonized and bred successfully there, conservationists do not support moving terns off East Sand.

Long-term ownership of East Sand Island, currently in Army Corps of Engineers hands, is not addressed by the EIS. The Corps and conservationists have urged its addition to the National Wildlife Refuge system. An ABC-designated globally Important Bird Area, the island also has over 6,700 roosting endangered "California" Brown Pelicans, and a large mixed

Posted by Surfbirds at May 31, 2005

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE COMMON IORA (*Aegithinia tiphia*)

The **Common Iora** (*Aegithinia tiphia*) is a common woodland migrant bird and is generally met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. It is possible to identify this bird more through the ear than the eyes as its pleasant whistling call is unlike any other woodland bird and it is generally very distinctive and easy to place. The birds are mostly at home on large shady trees with dense foliage with which they blend very easily.

There is a tendency sometimes to confuse these birds with Orioles – and there is no doubt that when indistinctly seen through the foliage, there is a certain resemblance. Both birds are yellowish in colour and, if the black barrings on the wings of the Iora cannot be seen, confusion is inevitable; but a short wait and the birds will begin to call and then there can be no further doubt. Iora's are not given to being very silent and they will be heard calling most of the time that they are in sight.



The Common Iora also makes its home with us. We have come across the small, very neat cobweb-covered nest suspended in the crotch of a small twiggy tree in the heart of the Anantgiri forest, down in the valley. There is a record once of the nest having been seen with 4 chicks clamouring loudly for nourishment. The adults were observed bringing spiders and small midge-like insects for their offspring to eat.

The birds are perhaps more common than is generally supposed. Their plumage blends in so perfectly with their preferred habitat that they are not often seen and, when you have a bird calling, it is difficult to say whether the call comes from one throat, or multiple throats. But these birds are often seen and in fair numbers. They spread out greatly when they come in with the migrant populations and find sheltered places throughout the subcontinent where the habitat is conducive, from the sea-coast up to the evergreen forests of the ghat ranges.

PIGEON POST

The most disconcerting thing about the City Birdbrain's column in Pitta of 6 June 2005 is that he/she is still full of guilt and shame over a "misidentification" that occurred years ago. I would very humbly advise him/her to get rid of this albatross which evidently causes great anguish

from time to time. There is no need to "plead excuse", sir/madam. Just get on with birding and enjoy yourself.

Dr Aminuddin Khan (via Email)

1st AGM Notice Dated 01 July 2005

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on **Monday 22nd August 2005**. All members are urged to ensure that their membership fees is paid up for the current year, failing which they would be ineligible to attend the proceedings.

The main item on the agenda would be the elections for office bearers of the BSAP. Those members desirous of standing for elections should meet the following criteria:

- ✓ They should be members for a consecutive period of at least three years.
- ✓ They should be of good standing in the BSAP
- ✓ They should not have any outstanding dues with the BSAP.

Members who are desirous of standing for the elections should forward their nominations in writing, proposed and seconded by full members of the BSAP to the Hon. Secretary at the Society's address. The elections would be held at the same time as the Annual General Meeting of the society. The date and time would be intimated in the Pitta for the relevant month.

The agenda of the AGM would be:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Elections of Office Bearers (please see above)
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business

Please treat this as official intimation of the Annual General Meeting and ensure that you are eligible and available to attend the same.

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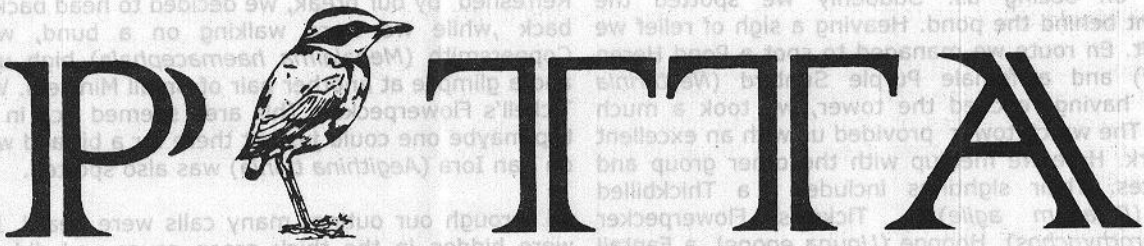
For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

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Field Outings

Sunday, 25-ix-2005: Rouriyal Tank, Rangareddi District

Route Charminar – Barkas – Pahadi Shareef. After 12 – 13 km., take the first left turn after Pahadi Shareef and drive on for 5 km. to the tank, which is on the right hand side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Crested Honey Buzzards that are always to be seen in the area, and used to nest in a large tree near the tank. There are sure to be some ducks, such as Pintails and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 19-ix-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on Bird flights and Aircrafts by Dr. Narasimhachari, Retd. Professor of Zoology; Kakatiya University.

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

NEWS & NOTES

FIELD TRIP TO CHILKUR DEER PARK (14th August 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Arjun Surendra

Our arrival at the park gate, was heralded by two Grey Partridges (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), which gave us a fly past salute. On closer inspection of the gate we found, much to our chagrin, that it was locked. We did however, manage to spot the watchman lazing about on his chair. After rendering ourselves hoarse, we were able to attract his attention and rouse him out of his early morning reverie. Well, finally the gates were opened. The delay at the gate however, gave us an opportunity to do some birding. We managed to see a Tree pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) and a Redvented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). We parked the car and waited for the others to arrive. During this time we had a couple of interesting sightings. A Common Grey Hornbill (*Tockus birostris*) was spotted. One sighting puzzled us for a little while though, we saw a bird that was half hidden in the

grass. This turned out to be a Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides malcolmi*).

The attendance was taken and there were twenty people present. We split into two groups and headed out with our respective guides. One of the first things we saw was a male Small Minivet (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*) perched atop a tree. The angle of the sun was just right to highlight the beautiful orange-crimson breast. It was joined by the female and they soon flew off together. A Franklin's Wren-Warbler (*Prinia hodgsonii*) was spotted. Some members of our party saw a herd of Spotted Deer. We were planning to head towards the watch tower when our guide got us lost, we climbed rocks to try and spot the tower, but the foliage was too thick. We then decided to retrace our steps and see if we could locate the elusive tower. We could hear a Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and finally we did manage to see it. As we were walking toward a small pond we saw two birds fly past. One of them was a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and the other a Small Pratincole. Further ahead, at another largish pond we saw a pair of Spotbill Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

that took off on seeing us. Suddenly we spotted the watchtower right behind the pond. Heaving a sigh of relief we set off toward it. En route we managed to spot a Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) and a female Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*). Finally having reached the tower, we took a much needed break. The watch tower provided us with an excellent view of the park. Here we met up with the other group and exchanged notes. Their sightings included a Thickbilled Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*), Tickell's Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*), Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), a Fantail Flycatcher, Purplerumped Sunbird (*Nectarinia Zeylonica*)

Refreshed by our break, we decided to head back. On our way back, while we were walking on a bund, we spotted a Coppersmith (*Megalaima haemacephala*) high up on a tree, and a glimpse at another pair of Small Minivets. We also saw a Tickell's Flowerpecker. This area seemed rich in birdlife, next trip maybe one could just sit there for a bit and watch. Further on, an Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) was also spotted.

All through our outing, many calls were heard. But the birds were hidden in the thick green cover and did not deem us worthy enough to grant us an audience.

A TRIP TO NAGARHOLE NATIONAL PARK

By Mrs. Gool R. Plumber

Nagarhole and Bandipur National Parks together cover a little over 1500 sq. km., of which Nagarhole covers 645 sq. km. Its official name is Rajiv Gandhi National Park. These two parks, along with Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, form a contiguous wildlife habitat. The river Kabini flows through Nagarhole and, on the other side of the river, the Bandipur National Park is visible. The Kabini river subsequently joins the river Cauvery. Nagarhole, in the local language, means "Snake River", after which the Park is named. The jungle stretches between the Western Ghats on one side, and the lovely Nilgiri Hills on the other. They support a rich array of wildlife – from herds of Asiatic Elephants to the majestic Tiger.

My husband and I stayed for 3 nights (from 4th to 7th May), in the Kapila Resort. This resort is about 1 km. from the Kabini River Lodge. It is spread over a large area and has small colonial type bungalows which are well maintained. Our bungalow faced the Kabini River and had four spacious rooms – double rooms with covered verandah, overlooking the river. There are four such bungalows with a central open spacious restaurant for meals. The service is good and the staff is courteous and willing to give information. Most of the staff are young and, though Kannada is the most prevalent language, most of them, especially the jeep drivers, know English.

The manager, Mr. Vikram is a quiet, helpful person; well-versed in wildlife and has books and other material on nature. My husband, who is an avid reader preferred to spend his time on the verandah reading a fascinating book from Mr. Vikram's collection. He did not join the safaris except on the first evening. But he found much peace and harmony in nature, sitting on the verandah and reading, or walking along the river bank facing our bungalow.

The resort offers a good array of nourishing vegetarian food and the fresh air sharpened our appetites so that both of us enjoyed the food, relishing also the ambience of the place. During dinner, they had log fires burning and the pathways back to the bungalow were well lit with low, covered lights.

During our stay, we had three different families staying in the other wing of the bungalow and, on the last day, an American

software engineer stayed in the room next to us. These were the people along with me, who were taken on jeep safaris twice a day – in the morning from 6.30 a.m. to almost 9 a.m. and in the evening from 4 p.m. to about 6.45 p.m. The best part of our visit to Nagarhole were these safaris and I went six times during our stay. The drivers are young and have keen eyesight for spotting wildlife even from a long distance. They are also very familiar with the flora and know all the tracks, watch towers, and which are the best spots to see wildlife.

In the park, we saw giant Bamboo groves and for the first time, I saw such luxuriant growth of Bamboos. We saw teak in some areas of the forest and, within the precincts of the lodge, we saw young Sandalwood trees. As it was May, the trees were bare in some parts, but I could spot Indian Laburnums, Indian Coral Trees and Red Silk Cotton trees (they were already bare of blossoms). We also saw Lantana bushes along some of the pathways.

Coming to wildlife, we were thrilled to see herds of wild Elephants along the Kabini river bank in the evenings and during the morning safaris in the bamboo thickets. This was not an uncommon sight. Between Nagarhole and Bandipur forests, there are about 5000 elephants, and the forest provides them with grass, bamboo, waterholes and the river. Though we could not spot tiger or panther, the jeep attendant and driver showed us clear pug marks of both these cats, which are naturally shy and secretive.

Two major herbivores seen were many small herds of Gaur and herds of Spotted Deer (Chital). Both these species were quite common. The Gaur are strong and muscular, but gentle and quiet animals. They were generally spotted along grass patches in the forest, and similar patches on the river banks. The bulls are darker than the cows, but their deep brown coat with the white socks make them very conspicuous. Chital are much commoner in these forests and I was amazed at the size of some of the herds we encountered.

There is a close relationship between Chital and Langur monkeys. We saw the monkeys on the lower branches of trees, giving warning calls to the deer on seeing our jeep, and the herd would quickly scamper away into the bushes. Amongst the animals, Langur are perhaps the most alert. It

was a delight to watch them swing through the trees with such grace; and they also provided many opportunities to observe their behaviour.

The other animals we spotted were small groups of wild boar and wild dogs. Mongoose and grey squirrels were often seen on the forest floor. Twice, our driver spotted Malabar Giant Squirrels high up in the forest canopy, and it was a wonderful sight, as we could not have spotted them on our own.

Nagarhole is also a paradise for birds and the following list of birds were seen on most of the safari trips:

Indian Roller; Hoopoe; Goldenbacked Woodpecker; Brainfever Bird; Myna; Peafowl; Jungle Fowl; Redwattled Lapwings; Cormorants; Little Egret; Large Egret; Kingfisher; Pond Heron; Black Ibis; Coucal; Snake Eagle; Large Pied Wagtail; Little Brown Dove; Fish Owl; Jungle Crow; Racquet-Tailed Drongo;

Babblers; Painted Stork; Black-rumped Flameback Woodpecker; Crested Hawk-Eagle (nest); Sparrows; Bee-eater; Sunbird; Baybacked Shrike; Indian Robin; Bulbul.

Of these, the Indian Roller, Hoopoe and Mynas were common. On our morning safaris, the jungle resounded with bird calls and those of Langur and Peafowl. These were glorious moments and I thanked God for His creation and he staff, who have preserved these forests.

On the last day, we learnt that forest officers were involved in elephant counts in Nagarhole. There are seven watch towers near the waterholes and there are always two men there to keep a watch.

One thing we noticed was large logs of wood and plenty of dead trees along the tracks. (*Is this a disturbing sign - Editor*).

BIRDS OF A CITY PARK

By Siraj A. Taher

Situated along the main road in Banjara Hills, it was once a small, natural lake with a few houses surrounding it. During a better part of the year the water level was good. Marshes and reeds added to the charm of the lake, and migratory ducks, besides the regular resident species, occasionally frequented it. A stray fowler would not be averse to taking a shot at them during the season. As time passed, and small houses started coming up all over the surrounding areas, this wonderful scene changed and the lake became dry; and continued to be so for several years. Then, a few years back, a nice park was laid up here, with lawns, trees, of course a canteen and playing area for the children, with the lake as the centre of attraction. Of course, the marshes and reeds were there, but so was boating and cemented embankments.

For sometime, no water birds could be seen except some Pond Herons and a few Little Egrets. This year I happened to visit the park fairly regularly to take my grand-daughter to play there, and I beheld that the lake was abuzz with waterbirds - Coots, Waterhens, Egrets, Swallows and Swifts, Ducks (both domesticated and wild), and a few Geese.

I started to feed bread to the domestic ducks and geese and one day, a Coot swam down from a clump of reeds, picked up a few pieces of bread and frantically waded and half-flew back into the reeds. It came back a few minutes later for more food. I then realised it was carrying the bread back for its young amongst the reeds. Soon another Coot joined it, and my granddaughter and I were enjoying throwing pieces of bread to be picked up by the Coots. All this time, the feral ducks and geese were merrily feeding on the bread pieces thrown in the water, frequently chasing away the coots.

A few weeks later, the parent coots had five chicks following them. In mid-June I observed chicks of the Whitebreasted Waterhen and two parents showing the same behaviour; and two days later, a pair of Spotbill Ducks with a flotilla of seven chicks also came up to the water's edge for feeding with the other birds on the bread. All this was very delightful for me, but also very sad that these waterbirds could not find enough food for their young on the ponds. Will I see them next year also...?

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE INDIAN TAILOR BIRD (*Orthotomus sutorius*)

The **Tailor Bird** (*Orthotomus sutorius*) is a jaunty little olive green bird with white underparts, rusty crown and two elongated pinpointed feathers in the tail. They inhabit scrub country, near cultivation, gardens, wooded areas and deciduous jungle. They are found throughout the Indian subcontinent but are absent in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

This bird is a resident species and is familiar and confiding. It is equally at home in outlying scrub jungle as in gardens and shrubbery in the heart of a city. It is known to fearlessly enter verandahs of even occupied houses, hopping amongst the creepers and potted plants, within a few feet of the inmates, giving vent to its



loud cheerful trilling call. They are fond of tiny insects, their eggs and grubs and also have a partiality to flower nectar.

Five races are thought to occur in the subcontinent. All of them are adept in the sewing of leaves of trees to construct their very clever nests. Selecting some tree with large leaves, such as teak or wild almond, the birds will either fold over a single leaf and stitch it along the edges or, if not able to find trees with such large leaves, they are equally skilled in stitching together two or three leaves of other trees. The funnel is then lined with soft fibres, cotton and vegetable down, and the eggs are laid therein.

There is reason to suppose that these birds have suffered less in the current mass urbanisation. Since they are able to adapt to small gardens and scrub areas, the populations, though dwindling, are not very discouraging. The birds are seen nesting in areas such as the large municipal parks within the city, and also in shady gardens where such still exist. Still, it would be well to ensure that the population is indeed stable – some dedicated work is required to be done here to ensure that there is still a viable population left of these birds in the area.

MY FIRST BARN OWL

By Humayun Taher

There is something magical about working late in the nights, even if it be in the surrounds of the concrete jungle. Objects that are only too clear during the daylight hours take on ghostly shapes when viewed in those velvet hours between dusk and dawn. Even an object as innocuous as a dead cocoanut palm can look strangely eerie after dark. The proper habits of *Homo sapiens* are all related to the day. At night, without the sanctuary of bright lights, a human being is a mere apology. He is afraid, mortally afraid and powerless in the dark!

And yet, this magical time is utilised by other beings of this world. Who has not heard the eerie chatter of the Spotted Owlets from the nearby trees. Or the haunting boom of the Great Horned Owl often startles those more blessed with natural areas around their homes, as he sails through the night skies on his lawful business. If gifted with sharp hearing, the little squeaks of the pipistrelle as it hawks insects, reminds us that there are other mammals that also thrive in the nights.

Yet another denizen of the dark hours is the Barn Owl. And, a few days ago, in the heart of the city, just a stone's throw away from the Hyderabad International Airport, I was privileged to see one – a ghostly shadow in the darkness, a sudden flurry of wings in the night, and there alighted on a window ledge a veritable phantom of the night. It sat there, looking over its shoulder onto the busy street below; and then turned those huge eyes straight into mine. There were black pools of thought behind those eyes: If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the soul of the Barn Owl is deep and awesome. There are illimitable jungles in those eyes, and the power and wisdom to bring them into the ken of the bird! I had a strange hypnotic feeling that the bird was not only able to see me, but was also able to read my thoughts much better than I could read his.

All this took much less time than it takes to tell. Whether, it disapproved of my stare, or whether it had business elsewhere, I

cannot tell; but the bird suddenly took off and vanished into the darkness from whence it had come. I caught a glimpse of the silhouette as it crossed the street, and then the dark swallowed up the phantom as though it had never been there at all. All I had, to remember it, was the memory of those brilliant golden eyes. And then I remembered something else also – that this was the very first time I had seen a wild Barn Owl. I have seen them in other places, it is true. Twice have I seen them in the cages in the bird market. On one occasion, in long ago days, there came two of these birds to the house, in a wire cage of rough manufacture – props for a horror movie, they were; and the producer, having no further use for these birds, brought them and handed them over to the then secretary of the BSAP. Malnourished, exhausted and plain terrified, one of the birds did not survive the night. The other was stronger, and he at least made it through the night – though I do not know if he made it to the end!

All I can think of is that, if more people were given the grace to stare into the eyes of an Owl, they would probably emerge from the encounter as better and stronger people, with more understanding of the world we share. Do I sound anthropomorphic – maybe... But blame it on the hypnotism of the owl's eyes. They make you think, believe me. Think about our place in the world – and the ridiculous inventions we make to ensure that the dark does not frighten us. And then still continue to be afraid to go and see why the lights are not working.

At the end, if I were given the grace to return to earth in a form of my choosing, I may well opt for an owl. No matter if people do call me "ullu"; at least I will have the opportunity to get to know better those velvet hours between twilight and dawn, that are denied to the human intruder!

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Field Outings.

Sunday, 23-x-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak District

Route Balanagar – Dundigal Airforce Base. Meet near the temple on the side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be some woodland migrants around now. Narsapur is rich in woodpeckers and these should be added attractions. Both species of *Chloropsis* and possibly *Spangled Drongo*. Added attractions here are the *Brown Fish Owls* that are sometimes seen near the lake. The lake also almost always has a flock of *Indian River Terns*. There may also be some ducks, such as *Pintails* and *Common Teal* around. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

NEWS & NOTES

FIELD TRIP TO ROURIYAL TANK (25th September 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Humayun Taher

Never would I have believed that a slight shower of rain would have the effect of quelling the ardour of the avid twitcher. The age of birdwatching seems to be dying out! One wonders where those hardy souls are, that ventured forth armed with mackintoshes and plastic bags carefully draped over their binoculars, to peer excitedly at little birds, dimly visible through the drizzle. Yet, to my unbounded amazement, this is exactly what did not happen.

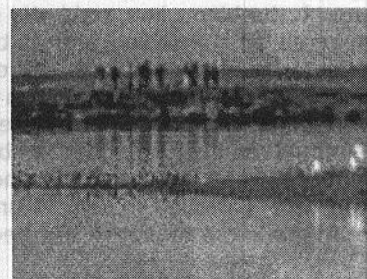
Reaching Punjagutta cross-roads well before the scheduled kick-off at 6.30, my father and myself waited... and waited... and waited some more. Finally, we decided that either we have chosen the wrong date, or that something is the matter. A couple of phone calls elicited the information that most of the members who were supposed to turn up had turned down because it was apparently raining. I grant that there was a slight drizzle, but surely not enough to warrant the cancellation of the trip.

Nothing daunted, we decided that if the rest of the members are not forthcoming, we will go ourselves. Shafaat Ulla Saab decided to accompany us, and the three of us set out at

around 7.30 or so. Strangely enough, almost as soon as we started, the rain slackened and eventually stopped and, by the time we reached Rouriyal, the sun was back in action and shining strong.

Reaching the waterbody was rather saddening as there was hardly any water there at all. A couple of shallow puddles was all that remained of the once-full lake where we had even seen *Barheaded Geese* in the days of long-ago. And of waterbirds there was not a sign. The only ones we could see were a couple of *Black Ibis*, a few *Little Cormorants* and *Pond Herons*. In the fields nearby, we saw several *Cattle Egrets*, but I doubt if these can be included in true waterbirds category.

Having parked the car near the bund, we started to walk along it to see what transpired. There was a herd of cattle in the fields adjoining the lake and, in attendance on these, we saw several *Cattle Egrets* and a few *Common Mynas*. Peering at the *Mynas* through the binoculars, we were able to spot a pair of *Pied Starlings* also feeding on the ground. This was interesting because even though it is apparent that *Pied Starlings* have moved into the Hyderabad region, they are still not birds that



are met with everyday. So we stood there and exclaimed over the birds which nonchalantly continued their feeding.

Continuing along the bund, we notched up a few Redvented Bulbuls, Whiteheaded Babbler and Roseringed Parakeets. A family of Mynas alighted on an electricity pole nearby and the antics of these stubby-tailed youngster brought a smile to the lips as it sat there, teetering gently in the breeze, seemingly almost on the point of falling but never quite getting there. Further up, we encountered other small birds of the bushlands. Ashy Wren Warblers were sporting in the bushes, accompanied by Tailor Birds, singing raucously in the bushes. There were also a few other little chaps around, but I am hopeless at identifying these LBJ's and prefer to put them down in the list just as LBJ's and have done with it! Sorting out the length of the third primary feather and the thickness of the beaks is not for me – and I have no hesitation in admitting it.

Swallows and Swifts sported in the air. One of the Common Swallows flew so close that we were able to see a small loose feather in the snowy-white shirt front! The spotless white plumage would have made a detergent manufacturer weep with joy!

Further up there was a surprise. We were watching a half-dozen or so Redwattled Lapwings running around in the fields when a large wader appeared. It alighted at the water's edge but was immediately set upon by a nearby Pond Heron. Taking fright at this attack, the wader swerved off and landed on a small patch of unattended shallow water. He immediately proceeded to wade around in the water which, at times, came almost up to his belly, so that he gave a very curious impression of actually swimming. We peered at the chap through the binoculars and hotly contested identity. At times it appeared as something and at times as something else. The problem was that we were only carrying Collins pictorial guide with us. The other books were in the car, which was now quite some distance away. So we noted as many of the features as we could and then legged it back to the car to establish identity. Based on the notes and plumage, we identified the chap as a Bartailed Godwit. I understand that this species is not found in the region so this becomes a notable sighting.

Near the car, a trio of Indian Rollers was disporting in the air. Mindful of the fact that European Rollers are also sometimes to be seen in Hyderabad, we took a close look, but the birds were obviously Indian Rollers. A Black Drongo nearby watched these antics disapprovingly. An Iora called and Green Bee-eaters flashed around. A Pied Bush Chat put in an appearance, along with a couple of Indian Robins – causing some confusion. We were speculating on the absence of Shrikes when a Brown Shrike appeared; silencing our complaints.

Eventually, we decided to start back. Hot chicken patties and cool water and then into the car, headed for the village, where we hoped to find a *chaiwallah*. We were not disappointed in this and we found a chap who specialised not only in *chai*, but also in hot *mirchis*. Much refreshed, we headed back, being stopped en-route by a soaring Blackheaded Snake Eagle (Short-toed Eagle to the old timers...). Further up, we heard Painted Partridge calling. And that set the seal on the end. Not a great day's birding, but a wonderful day in the bush. If only

more people realized that weather is no deterrent to birding. In fact, rainy days bring out the best – and that itself is a great incentive not to miss a rainy day's birding.

ANNUAL GENERAL BODY MEETING OF THE SOCIETY:

Held on 22nd August 2005, at Vidyaranya School, Hyderabad

Members of the Society assembled at the Vidyaranya School at 6.00 p.m. Even at 6.30 p.m. the Quorum of members was not present so the meeting had to be adjourned under rule 26 of the Rules and Regulations of the Society. The meeting was again called to order after 15 minutes and, as per the rules, whatever the number of members present would constitute a proper Quorum.

The President gave his annual report of the work of the Society and also projected the future course of action that the Society and its members need to formulate to wake the society from its slumbers and to put it back on the rails. All the activities of the society, field trips, indoor meetings, lectures and slide shows seemed to have become individual efforts rather than member activities. As you can see, this month there is no indoor meeting and till such time as proper programmes can be planned and organised, the activities of the society would continue to decline. It is indeed sad to think that more than 25 years after its inception, the BSAP is still struggling with everything; whether it is organising field trips or indoor meetings or printing its newsletter PITTA, or the Journal MAYURA. If it goes on like this, there will not be much to write about or to do, and all the recognition and acclaim that the society has attained, and the real work put in, thanks to its hardworking, motivated and dedicated members would be in vain. It is a sad reflection that even for its AGM, a proper quorum was not present.

The meeting proper started and the society accepted with regret the resignation of four of its senior and active members. While Aasheesh Pittie, Raajeev Mathew and S. Ashok Kumar gave personal difficulties as the reason to continue as Executive Committee members, Kiran K. had left for the U.K. and was thus unable to serve on the EC. Four members were proposed for the E.C. and duly elected. They are C. Bhaskar Rao, Nand Kumar, Sheetal Vyas and Humayun Taher.

The Hon. Secretary gave a brief report and also the Hon. Treasurer presented the accounts. The meeting ended with thanks to Mr. Ram Babu, Vidyaranya School, the Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi, AP Forest Department and other project sponsors. The Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi have been again appointed for a further period of 2 years.

Project: The members were apprised of the ongoing Telugu translation work given to the society, for translating the book BIRDS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, by Grimmett, R; Inskipp, C and Inskipp, T. The work is almost over and the manuscripts have to be put on CD and sent for final printing.

The Executive Committee again met at the house of Susheel Kapadia on 2.10.2005. The following office bearers have been elected:

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1) Siraj A. Taher | President |
| 2) M. Shafaat Ulla | Vice-President |
| 3) C. Bhaskar Rao | Hon. Secretary |
| 4) Susheel Kapadia | Hon. Treasurer |

Sheetal Vyas was proposed for handling the programmes of the society in the media and she accepted this and agreed to do the work. Nand Kumar, M.S. Kulkarni and J.V.D. Moorthy would look after the procuring of funds for society projects. Siraj A. Taher agreed to take up the matter of arranging for Indoor Meetings as and when they are planned.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

I'm not quite sure if the species that I propose to discuss in this episode can qualify for an urban species. However, since the name of the bird is suggestive of such, perhaps I can be excused for taking it as an urban species. Besides, I happen to have seen a small flock the other day, hawking insects quite happily in the late evenings, in the vicinity of the office. So we will devote this month to the study of that interesting bird, the House Swift.

These are most entertaining birds. In appearance, they resemble little bows, complete with arrows fitted! And their tiny beaks are forever questing for midges, flies and other assorted insect life. All day, they are on the wing, in quest of various delicacies that would appeal to the gourmet House Swift. And now that they seem to have moved into the city, they appear to have a still greater variety in their diet. One disadvantage of this is, of course, that they have to put up with a considerable amount of pollution. But they are willing to put up with it for the advantage of the variety in their diet.

The bill of these birds is a perfect apology, but their gape is very wide. It has to be, as they prefer to do most of their eating in the air. Such a habit, if performed by one with a small gape, would cause onlookers to raise their eyebrows at the appalling table manners. The House Swift solves the problem by maintaining a gape of considerable size and this appendage helps it to swallow its food in full flight without scandalizing onlookers with its table manners.

Not only is the bird very compact looking, it's home too is cozy. They build under balconies and in small nooks and corners of old buildings. The nest is composed almost entirely of small feathers and straw and is held in place with the birds' saliva. The entrance is constructed between the wall and the nest cup. Here the birds line their home with soft down and raise a brood of huge gaped, ever-hungry chicks. How the parents manage to find enough time during the day to satisfy the appetite of their ever-hungry offspring is a mystery to me. But they seem to do it with remarkable aplomb.

I remember in the days of long ago, when I was much younger than I am now, a House Swift was brought to the house. I cannot now recollect how it got here, but the problem with it was a broken wing. For a bird that survives entirely in a state of flight, this was a quite serious injury. Swifts spend almost the entire day on the wing, so the loss of one wing almost certainly means death for the bird. With us, perhaps it would have a chance of survival.

The first problem that presented itself was where to keep the bird. A Swift's feet are very strangely constructed. All four toes point forward. So the bird is incapable of perching in the true sense. We solved this problem by getting a cane-backed chair. Placing the bird on it, we found that it would cling to the cane webbing quite easily and, in this rather strange posture, it preferred to live. So that solved the problem of lodging. The boarding, however, was also a matter of some interest. How to feed it...? And what to feed it? Flies suggested themselves – there was a sugarcane juice vendor near the house and the crushed stalks of sugarcane attracted hundreds of flies. I invested in a couple of flyswats and made hourly visits to the sugarcane stall, where I swatted several dozen flies, much I may add, to the amusement of the vendor and his several customers, and carried them back in a small tin box and, with the aid of a pair of small tweezers, fed them to the bird, as it hung on the back of the chair. The bird eventually managed to get over its broken wing, but before we could find out if it would make a successful return to the wild, a cat had a very conclusive interview with it.

Since Swifts have very special feet, with all their four toes pointed forward, they cannot perch and they are therefore forced to hang from edges. Consequently, you will never see them perched on telegraph lines as do their cousins, the Swallows. This lends a certain amount of ungainliness to their appearance when at rest. But see the same bird on the wing, and you will never believe that it is the same chap that was hanging so precariously from the edge of the nest. In the air, a Swift is just that – swift and most elegant. They simply swim through the air!

Perhaps the major enemy of these birds is the Hobby. Other predators simply do not have the speed necessary to catch these birds, though they sometimes put in a few vain attempts. Having said that, there is a record of a Kestrel having caught a House Swift once. I wasn't there when this happened, but the incident was reported in a British birding magazine which, I regret to report, I seem to have mislaid and now I cannot even recall the name of the excellent journal. But generally speaking, even the Hobby has its work cut out in trying to catch one of these birds for its dinner. The Swifts are fast birds and are quite capable of outflying even this, the swiftest of the falcons.

There was a time when the nests of these birds were collected, to supply the Chinese kitchens with the ingredients for birds' nest soup. Chinese seem to specialise in delicacies that bring the natural world into grave danger! Be that as it

may, there is a species known as the Edible Swiftlet, whose nest is composed almost entirely of the saliva of the bird, and this is the most sought after ingredient for the soup. But in the absence of the nest of the Edible Swiftlet, other species' nests are equally eagerly sought. So the House Swift also suffered in this sort of poaching. The nests were collected with little regard for whether they supported young or not. Doubtless, if the nests contained young, the poachers would have found a use for them also of a culinary nature!

Even so, with all these dangers surrounding it, the Swifts go through life, twittering happily as they hawk the midges and moths that form their bill of fare. And if you have the time and the inclination, it is worth spending a few minutes watching their antics in the air. Keep watching the House Swift. Until next month – Happy Birding!!

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

The Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) is the commonest of our falcons and, in the proper season, is seen in quite sizeable numbers in its chosen habitat of open country, with scattered trees and scrub. Also inhabits fields and grasslands. Here it hunts for locusts, field mice and lizards and the occasional small sickly or wounded bird.

Members of the BSAP have been doing some bird ringing of these birds for some years now. Although no reports have come in of recoveries from outside, there have been several of these birds ringed in the course of the three years in which the studies were conducted.

Several specimens of this bird have been kept in captivity from time-to-time and they are found to be a confiding species which rapidly lose their fear of man. Some of these captive specimens were trained to hunt and they proved to be fairly good at it, though the size of their prey was necessarily in keeping with their own small size. An interesting aspect is that none of the trained birds ever hunted by their normal wild method of hovering. Hovering appears to be a prerogative of only the wild birds. This hovering flight is very interesting to watch, as the bird is often seen almost suspended in one spot, only the tips of its wings rapidly beating.

A subspecies of this bird, the Indian Kestrel is supposed to be a resident of Southern India and Sri Lanka. However, there is no record of this race being seen in the Hyderabad region.

Loss of habitat is a prime reason for the decline of the species. Earlier, there used to be seen quantities of these birds in the Jubilee Hills area, but with the wholesale destruction of the rocks and scrub area which was the preferred habitat, the birds have declined significantly and now it is a very rare sight to see a Kestrel in areas where, but a few years ago, it was found in impressive numbers. Protection of the habitat is vital to the survival of these visitors to our shores. Another source of danger is the activities of trappers. There is a good market for birds of the hawk tribe, here in Hyderabad as we are often visited by Arab sheiks who value these birds for falconry. Even though the Kestrel is generally not used for serious falconry, yet it is a falcon and, as such, can be used for the purpose. Therefore, there is a market for them and, in the season, quite a few are to be seen in the cages of the bird market, where they command quite a fair price. This, coupled with the loss of their habitat and the scarcity of food, is making these birds much more uncommon than they once used to be. It is high time that people woke up to the fact that these birds are in grave danger, and try and do something about it.



The BSAP is planning to organise a field camp for five days to Dehra Dun via New Delhi, in the month of December. All interested members are requested to please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla on Tel.: (040) 2335 3098

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Field Outings

Sunday, 27-xi-2005: Shamirpet Deer Park and Lake, Medak District

Route Secunderabad Club – Trimulgherry. The Deer Park should provide an abundance of small woodland birds, while the lake should have at least a few waterfowl on it by this time. The rocks around the lake used to attract Peregrine Falcons but that was a long time ago and it is unlikely that this noble bird will be seen here now. But there should be some ducks like Pintail and Spotbills, provided that there is sufficient water in the lake. Look for Flycatchers and Warblers in the Deer Park. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 21-xi-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on The Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of Species: By Humayun Taher

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

EDITORIAL

Society News – or the lack of it.

Sadly, it seems that the woeful conditions with regard to the Society news continue unchanged. Why is it that people are so hesitant to submit notes to the Pitta. I have said earlier in this column that the job of making the writers' efforts more professional is for the editor. But the editors cannot create the news events, that the members attend. This activity is in the hands of the members. I believe that there was a fair turnout for the Society field trip in October to Narsapur. And yet, no-one has thought it worthwhile to just pen down what happened on that day and send it in for inclusion. You may think that nothing worthwhile happened, or that none of the sightings were interesting. But if you do not report, then that will certainly be the case; whereas if you do report, it could happen that a few years down the line, there would be some data hidden in this report that would be worth talking about. Believe me, it has happened before and it could well happen again.

Fine, so the editor has no better things to do than to keep firing sarcasm at the readers for not writing. Believe me, the editor is definitely NOT wanting to be sarcastic. It is merely a strong appeal to the members that it reflects very poorly on the Society if we cannot even produce a newsletter that is all contributed to by the members. It is easy enough these days to get a whole book of stories from the internet and put them into Pitta. But where does that get us; it reduces the newsletter from the status of a NEWSLETTER to a mere Compilation of news that is not even strictly relevant to our area.

Is anyone out there listening? And willing to take steps to correct this state of affairs? And if anyone wants pointers on the "Art of Writing", invest in a copy of "The Common Birds of Bombay" by EHA. That will give you more lessons in the art of natural history writing than any textbook on the subject. Gerald Durrell too, would be wonderful for this purpose and he would probably be more readily available at the bookstores

than EHA. And if you can get hold of any of Lawrence Durrell's literary efforts – well, nothing else can even begin to compare.

So, who's going to be my first contributor to the news columns next month?

Column: Urban Birding

By *The City BirdBrain*

With the advent of the winters, several species of urban and suburban birds begin to bestir themselves and think longing thoughts of house and hearth. Along with this thought comes an awakening of the courtship instincts and, simultaneously, all the males burst into spontaneous song, in the time-honoured tradition of birds to acquire a mate and so procreate and continue the species. One of the first species to get into the act is that rather comical little fellow, the Spotted Munia. Very diminutive are they, but very vocal and, as they seem to be thrusting their attention on me through their loud trilling from the balcony – to remind me that there is a shortage of grain in the buffet tray – we will hasten first to charge the tray with grain and so to tell of Spotted Munias at the same time.

Despite their small size, these birds are extremely visible. We see them in places as diverse as the woodlands and, as like as not, in the farms where they forgather with their numerous other cousins and do battle on the grain crops; to the consternation and wrath of the farmer and the grain merchant alike. And they are equally at home in urban gardens or, as in my case, in the shelter of the balcony, in close attendance to the grain tray!

The appearance of these birds is distinctly pleasing to the eye: What with the scales on the breast and the chocolate brown plumage – both the hen and the cock sharing the same clothes – the pair cuts a natty figure against a backdrop of grey wall and green foliage. And coupled with this is the fact that they have very pleasant voices also. Not that they have a great repertoire, or that the song they sing is very pleasant; but what sounds they do produce are quite refreshing – mostly little twitters and cheeps as the hen and the cock lovingly peck at each others' faces and indulge in a little communal grooming.

In the old days, when we used to keep quantities of cage birds of the budgerigar and parakeet kind, Munias too were favoured for the cages; on account of their pleasant plumage and their cheerful twittering and trilling. EHA, one of the most interesting authors of British East India, has also commented on the cheerfulness produced by having a cageful of Munias in the veranda of the house. So far as I can remember, our birds were housed in a large cage some distance from the veranda, but their soundbox was loud enough for their twittering to carry to the said part of the house and that was sufficient to create a cheerful feeling in the house.

Though I confess to a sense of shame when I say this, there was a time when I used to use these birds as bait for catching hawks and falcons. I had a couple of them in a small wire cage to which were attached considerable number of nooses, and, when the hawk came to try and catch the birds, it invariably snared itself before it could do any damage to the birds

themselves. In fact, though I managed to catch 6 Kestrels in a single day once, not once was any of the Munias so much as scratched, though there were two Spotted and two White-throated in the cage. The gaps in the cage grill were just too small to allow the hawk to get its talons into the cage and catch them. What is interesting is that the birds did not die of shock – it speaks much about their hardiness.

A pair of Spotted Munias has been visiting the balcony food tray regularly. They generally arrive late in the evenings and hop around the balcony in the company of the Sparrows that are now swarming in impressive numbers to the balcony. They lend a certain amount of colour to the scene as they hop around, chirping cheerfully. The steam that rises from my teacup fascinates the hen. She has several times tried to stick her face into the cup to ascertain exactly what this strange phenomenon might be. Each time she tries, she gets a puff of hot steam in her nose which causes her to sneeze with some violence but, nothing daunted, she tries again once the sneezing fit is over. Her husband is a trifle better behaved and less curious, or perhaps more cautious – though it is interesting and touching to see how anxiously he looks towards his wife as she performs her curious antics with the steam, what appears to him to be dangerously close to my legs. Occasionally, I fancy that there is a reproachful look in his little black eyes and a faintly accusing note in his twittering – but this could be due to the over-active imagination that I rejoice in!

I remember seeing a pair of these birds attempting to build their nest in Chilkur deer park once. The pair had selected a small ashoka tree near the Environmental Education Centre for the purpose and they busily flew to and fro, carrying twigs, leaves and little bits of straw. We did a bit of work with stopwatch and binoculars at that time and discovered that the birds averaged one visit per minute to the nest. Based on this, of course, it was obvious that they added 60 twigs per minute to the nest being constructed. Further research would have involved pulling the nest to pieces and ascertaining how many hours the birds took to complete it. We were resolved to go back one day and collect the nest once the birds were through with it, but somehow this did not happen, and when next we saw the nest, it was again in use by the birds – an observation that prompts the question as to whether these birds are in the habit of reusing old nest sites. I personally feel that the nest was a secure place and there was little or no interruption so the birds found it convenient to re-use the nest.

What with the fact that the cook has stopped drying the grain outside, and that the housewife prefers to get her rice directly from the supermarket which obviates the necessity of cleaning it, the birds have less to attract them to urban gardens now than they previously had. Which brings us back to the question of whether they deserve the tag of urban birds at all

these days. They seem to be hanging on for now at least – considering that the balcony is playing host to one pair at least, with a second occasionally visiting. So keep those eyes peeled this month for small birds in chocolate coating, and the

ears open for excited twittering and you are bound to see one or two of these little chaps. Keep watching the Spotted Munias this month. Until next time – Happy Birding!

INDOOR MEETING - EVOLUTION Presentation Material

By Humayun Taher

This is the first attempt we are making at trying to make the Indoor Meetings more interactive. To this end, we are publishing a short write-up that is pertinent to the topic that would be discussed in the meeting. Hopefully, this would encourage members to attend the meetings and to be more proactive in the discussions. Please bring this issue of Pitta with you when you attend the Indoor Meeting of the Society on 21st November. The presentation would complement the notes given below.

The Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of the Species

In its simplest form, evolution means to change appearance and habits to suit the environment in which one finds himself.

Generally speaking, evolution means the cumulative change in characteristics of organisms, occurring through long series of generations. This process accounts for the origin of all extant organisms on earth.

Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) published *On The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. This book outlined the theory that the animals which exist today evolved from earlier, different species. This theory was based on three central observations. Firstly, all members within a species vary in some way. Some are taller than their fellows, some will be faster and so on. Secondly, most creatures produce large number of offspring – far more than will survive to become breeding adults. Thirdly, the total number in a particular species tends to remain more or less constant.

The very first species to appear on the face of the planet were monocellate plants, such as algae and fungi. These gradually evolved into the most complex organisms with which the earth is now populated.

When plants evolved, the earth was comparatively young and had a large concentration of Carbon dioxide in its atmosphere. This suited the plants which used this gas for respiration. So the plants evolved in many different ways and started to use the Carbon dioxide for their biological function, giving out, as a by-product, Oxygen. Considering that the atmosphere now started to hold considerably amounts of this gas, new evolving life-forms had to develop in a way where this gas could be used by them for some function. Therefore, life on earth evolved in a manner which allowed the use of Oxygen for the basic function of life, viz. breathing. As a by-product of this, they gave out Carbon dioxide, thus causing a full circle of usage. The plants used the Carbon dioxide given out by the animals using the Oxygen given out by plants . . .

④ The origins of life: Life probably began among the collection of chemicals in the primeval seas; from simple, single-celled organisms the whole of the present animal kingdom evolved.

④ The first stage: The story of evolution is one of ever-increasing complexity and specialisation – of progress from single-celled animals to complex creatures with billions of cells.

④ Arthropods: Out of more than a million known species of living animals, three-quarters are arthropods – perhaps the most adaptable and successful animals in the history of the planet.

④ Fish: For over 400 million years, fish have been among the most dominant life-forms on earth. Considering that over 70% of the earth's surface is covered in water, this is not so surprising. Also, the seas contain a considerable array of habitats which was used by fish to evolve in ways in which they could be colonised. Even in the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean, there is life, evolved to live in the stygian darkness and enormous water pressure.

④ Amphibians: A group of fish broke away from the main evolution stream and developed lungs, strengthened skeletal frames and flippers evolved to become limbs. These evolved into amphibians, the first ever vertebrates to colonise the land area of the earth.

④ Reptiles: By developing waterproof skins and ability to lay shelled eggs, some amphibians evolved into reptiles. They were able to invade dry land and travel long distances away from water if required. These creatures were among the most successful animals ever to populate the earth.

④ Dinosaurs: The word, meaning "Terrible Lizards" very aptly describes one of the most successful group of animals ever to walk the earth. For over 150 million years these giant reptiles ruled the earth; and evolved into a bewildering array of creatures, from the 1½ foot *Mussaurus*, to the huge 50 feet *Tyrannosaurus* and the 80 feet *Brontosaurus*.

① **Birds:** One branch of the reptiles evolved into birds. Originally feathers were probably evolved from scales as a form of insulation and temperature control. The evolution of feathers led to flight. It is possible that the first birds were not very good fliers. *Archaeopteryx* is assumed to be a very weak flyer and probably only took wing when seriously threatened.

② **Mammals:** Although reptiles were the first vertebrates to conquer the land completely, their cold-blooded bodies could not adapt to all environments, particularly the Polar Regions. Warm-blooded mammals then evolved to fill in these niches, and now mammals

cover almost all the regions and habitats that the earth has to offer, from the tropical areas to the polar regions, from the fresh-water lakes to the seas, from the highest mountains to the plains.

③ **Primates:** Starting around 65 million years ago, a small group of mammals evolved with large brains and dexterous hands; these are the early primates which culminated in monkeys, apes and ultimately, about 400,000 years ago, into modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE SPOTBILL DUCK (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

The **Spotbill Duck** (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) is one of our larger ducks and one of only a few resident species. They will be seen throughout the year on small and large jheels, lakes and reservoirs. Of recent years, they have also moved into the city and are seen in parks and gardens which have waterbodies in or around them. The public park on Banjara Hills Road No. 1 (Vengal Rao Park) is a good example, which has a family of these birds in residence. The plumage is mostly brown and grey, with a white and metallic green speculum. The most prominent feature is the dark bill, tipped with yellow and with two dark orange spots at the base; one on each side of the forehead. This is a distinctive feature and one which gives the bird its name.



The birds are found throughout the Indian Union, including the Andamans and also in the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. There seems to be some local movement throughout its range, but this is not authenticated. Three races have been identified, but only the typical race concerns us here in Southern India.

In the days when *Shikar* was legal, this bird was a favourite for the table. This could have been because of its resident habits and the fact that it could be got even in the non-migratory season. The old man tells of the days of his youth, when this bird was a frequent star in the kitchens! In view of this, the species is most wary and very difficult to stalk up to, even to this day. An interesting example of adaptation enduring even when the prime cause no longer endures.

The birds build with us here, the main season being during the South-West Monsoon (July to September). There is a record by the BSAP of a nest in Chilkur, by the side of a small path, close to a small natural pond. Generally, the nest is a pad of grass and weeds on the marshy margins of tanks and lakes. There are records of young birds from Nehru Zoological Park and other places around the city. It is not unlikely that the birds nest in the Zoo, because there is an abundance of favoured habitat around the large lake near the Lion Safari Park.

At the same time, there is considerable persecution of these birds throughout the year. I recollect seeing them for sale at Sunday bazaars in the livestock section and there are generally one or two in the shops at the Chowk Bird Market. It seems that their reputation as good table birds still precedes them and, being resident, they are to be had throughout the year. It is high time that the birds are given the protection that they deserve. And I think it is time that we too resorted to the old formula being used by Animal Planet that "When the Buying stops, the killing will too."

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